



## *Breath*

*Reviewed by Garry Victor Hill*

Directed by Simon Baker. Produced by Mark Johnson, Jamie Hiton and Simon Baker. Screenplay by Tim Winton, Gerald Lee and Simon Baker. Based on *Breath* by Tim Winton. Production Design by Steven Jones-Evans.

Cinematography by Marden Dean and Rick Rifici. Art Direction by Maxine Dannett. Set decoration: Christin Lynch. Original Music by Harry Gregson Williams. Edited by Danny Cooper. Cinematic length: 115/123 minutes.

Distributed by Film Rise. Cinematic release: Toronto Film Festival September 2017; DVD release: May 2018. Check for ratings. Rating 85%.

All images are taken from the Public Domain and Wiki derivatives with permission.

Written Without Prejudice

## Cast

Simon Baker as Sandon

Elizabeth Debicki as Eva

Samson Coulter as Pikelet

Ben Spence as Loonie

Richard Roxburgh as Mr Pike

Rachael Blake as Mrs Pike

Megan Smart as Karen

This film has mixed reviews with most being favourable. This review goes to the majority side, with some reservations. What hits first with *Breath* must be how it works well as an extremely accurate depiction of later 1970s or early 1980s small town Australian life. The subtext also deals with several more complex issues. Where the reservations lie must be with how some people will use this fine film.

If you like films where everything eventually becomes clearly explained in a neat ending without uncertainties you will not like *Breath*. Compared to Hollywood/Bollywood/BBC formula efforts this style of filmmaking should be welcomed.

Tim Winton's novel was the basis: he narrates and also worked on the screenplay. A masterly storyteller, he focuses on developments in the lives of

ordinary people, bringing out their complex interrelationships, frequently only hinting at what exists below the surface.

Early in the film the central character and narrator Pikelet (Samson Coulter) tells us that his friend Loonie (Ben Spence) taught him about fear. He initially does not say more than that, what he has taught him about fear remains unstated and so the viewer will make assumptions – don't. This voice over comes as the two boys fourteen and thirteen, do indeed exist below the surface, seeming to see how long they can hold their breath under water. In this voice over what becomes one of the film's strengths emerges: understated ambiguities which we are open to interpret. We could assume that this is a coming of age story were our hero (in the sense of being the sympathetic central character) becomes a hero in the sense of being courageous, victorious, self-confident and admired. Well no, because both courage and fear come under question. This questioning process unfolds in unexpected ways which are sometimes uncertain, frequently subtle and sometimes brazenly obvious.

This becomes apparent when the seemingly fearless Looney plays chicken with a speeding semi-trailer. Pikelet later witnesses how dangerous this may have been when on his school bus he sees an overturned semi with dead, bloodied passengers. Looney's courage does not merge with self-responsibility. When Pikelet's parents (Richard Roxburgh and Rachel Blake) question him about the chicken game, he lies. We see Loonie continually being blithe about danger, tailgating on a pot-holed road, board surfing on a shark infested beach, surfing alone among nearly ten foot waves with a storm clearly approaching and finally smuggling drugs from Asia. This sounds like fool's courage, but his swiftly observed and apt comments show he is no fool. What does motivate him is a teenager's sense of self and optimism and a desire for a father figure's approval. His actions suggests that sometimes courage is definitely not synonymous with wisdom.

Pikelet becomes his opposite. He has the wisdom to be cautious, but only occasionally pulls out of dangerous behaviour as he fears being thought of as a coward by his peers. At least until near the end, he cannot differentiate between the fear based in real danger and his emotional fears others play on.

The boys' lives become complicated when they meet two hippies living in an isolated counter culture house near the beach. 'Sando' (Sanderson, played by director/writer/producer Simon Baker) and Eva (Elizabeth Debicki). He is chatty and cheery, almost relentlessly so – when the boys are around. She seems to be his apparent opposite: laconic, enigmatic self-contained, unsmiling – and close to sullen. Her behaviour seems to be caused by a skiing accident that leaves her just barely able to walk, but is it? When she puts a box of old magazines out near the boys' surfboards Pikelet and Looney look through them and find pictures showing Sando as a once famous surfing champion. Seeing them with the magazines Sando abruptly becomes someone else from the happy fellow he seemed. Now tense, he virtually interrogates them about where they got the magazines and then angrily interrogates Eva, who took them to the garage.

We never learn why Sando changed abruptly. When they are alone Eva sullenly tells him that she does not want the boys around and that he should grow up. Gradually we sense that something is wrong as he spends more time surfing with them than he spends with her, although she obviously is nearly incapacitated when they surf they leave her alone. He likes teaching them surfing more than being with his wife.

Gradually we see some of his motivations for being with the boys so often. When he first tells them to stand above the common crowd and be an original by answering challenges which ever more challenging, this sounds okay, He seems to be a caring positive man inspiring fourteen year olds, but before Sando's fourth inspired identical recital, it sounds banal, as if he picked up



*Sando, Loonie and Pikelet.*

*Creative Commons/Wikipedia*



*Photographer: Eva Rinaldi. Elizabeth Debicki Creative Commons/Wikipedia*





*Photographer: BaroBert (sic). Green's Pool at William Bay Denmark W.A.  
Creative Commons/Wikipedia*

phrases from a self-help book somewhere. Even admiring Loonie wearies of hearing Sando's "hippy shit." Sando may be a near illiterate who can only grasp an idea in its simplest terms and cannot develop it, which is why he repeats it verbatim. Apart from being reminded that at fortyish he must be over the hill for surfing championships, is this why he becomes angry at the sight of the boys reading the magazines? He seems to be an extreme kinaesthetic learner, which explains why he is such a brilliant surfer. Their isolated beach house has an atmosphere of hiding out, of avoiding people and perhaps life. Although Sando frequently drives Pikelet home, he never meets Pikelet's parents, becoming uneasy on the occasion when he does see them on their lawn.

Is Sando repeating with the boys what happened with Eva years before? Was Eva, much younger than him, once his student who once believed in Sando's push to the limit platitudes? This may well be, as Eva and Sando are now temperamentally incompatible opposites. Sando shows Pikelet a picture of Eva as a snow skier, doing a high somersault, pushing to the limit. If the past did unfold that way she will not become his only victim.



*Photographer: Nachoman.au. The mouth of the river where Pikelet and his father fish. Creative Commons/Wikipedia*

Pikelet and Loonie do become the next victims in different ways that Sando may not be aware of. The dangerous wave called Old Smokey just has to be Sando's next challenge which they are supposed to conquer. Loonie, another kinaesthetic learner with a great aptitude for surfing, does so first off. It takes Pikelet longer, being not so kinaesthetic, we see him studiously doing his schoolwork and engrossed in reading Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Loonie leaves school as soon as he can to surf with Sando. Pikelet does conquer Old Smokey, but in doing so he ends up in danger, being off his board far out to sea, finding himself out of his depth, literally, figuratively and emotionally. When Old Smokey plunges him down to the depths and he surfaces gasping for breath, we are reminded of the challenge in the film's title and at the film's beginning.

Pikelet's abilities are those of the visual and sensual learner. He refers to the beauty of the landscapes and seascapes several times. This starts his clash with Sando and Loonie. When Sando rhetorically asks him would he live on a beach if he could not surf it, Pikelet says he would live there for the beauty of the beach. This question puzzles Pikelet; his answer puzzles Sando. This surf addict Sando does not really like or appreciate beaches or landscapes, which are only obstacles to overcome on the way to the waves. For him the waves are the challenge he can win; his enthusiasm for them is a form of self-gratification and ego bolstering. Sando is the alpha male and by putting the 1956 film *Moby Dick* on the Pike's television and having the book prominently displayed the filmmakers give us an indication of where things will go. Obsessive Captain Ahab who never listened to caution obviously led his crew to destruction. Only the narrator Ishmael survivedg in the ocean, drifting on a coffin. Instead of Ahab's great white whale we have Sando's great white wave. Instead of a coffin we have surfboards. Pikelet is another Ishmael. He is also another Marlowe, who narrated the downfall into wilderness savagery of the once great Kurtz, who left the city for the jungle.

In the film's denouement it becomes clear that Sando's arrested development does not mean he is as simple or as straightforward as his character seemed.

The film has been widely praised for it's beautiful photography, both of the landscapes (photographed by Marden Dean) and the many seascapes and surfing scenes (photographed by Rick Rifici). They merge so well that no trace appears of two different hands at work. The great art direction could be overlooked, but Sando and Eva's beach house is so true to the times that seeing it feels like being back in the later seventies. Recapturing that era is one of the film's great achievements. The way the film subtly depicts the positives and negatives in Australian surfing culture is another strength. When schoolgirl Karen cuts off her relationship with Pikelet in a note saying he is moody,



inattentive and selfish she is probably reacting to what a surfing obsession does, this could have had a scene or two to develop the idea.



*[Richard Roxburgh Wikipedia](#)*

The way surfing devours life so that nothing else matters for young males has been depicted before, mainly in *Puberty Blues* (1981) but here viewers are given much more of the beauty and exhilaration and needed skill of surfing; we can see why it would become so entrancing and absorbing.

Subtly merging several different original themes becomes another success. The narration puts courage and fear to the forefront. The subtexts of the failure of the hippie dream was apparent long before the film's setting of the later seventies, but here we see that failure developed, it now applies to the 1970s idea of finding happiness by escaping city life for alternative rural living.

Around 1% of Australians opted for this between the late 1960s and the middle of the 1980s. If environment was the problem than Sando and Eva should have succeeded, for they live in a perfect setting, but setting does not change their

personalities. Nor does it change the inability to relax: they are also in a perfect setting for that, yet all four main characters want tensions and challenges. Even Eva ultimately courts more danger than the males. *Breath* makes it clear that these dangerous desires are part of the human condition.

Now for the reservations. Upon seeing the film's many beautiful shots of West Australia the usual thought came: "Here we go again, another Australian film investors, developers and real estate agents will love." No surprise came upon finding that a West Australian Development group and government bureaucracies were amongst the financiers. Does anyone really believe that they include scenic views solely for their artistic merit?

Once again while most of us are entranced with the surfing shots, the beautiful and empty beaches and the mist covered serene forests, developers and would be migrants are watching and entranced in a different way, imagining the high rises, glossy plastic fast food outlets and roaring highways they can place there and how much they can sell all those curses for. Somewhere somebody is saying "This movie will make Denmark another Esperance!" Hopefully not. This once peaceful, beautiful West Australian town was once populated by ordinary Australians, not millionaires and tourists. In the 1970s celebrities bought there, word spread and now millionaires dominate. One bitter REAL ESTATE AGENT !!!! who spent much of his life there, told me he could not afford to buy in Esperance. As houses in Sydney are now rarely sold for under a million, even millionaires are concluding that they cannot afford to live in the big Australian metropolises. Their reputation for noise, pollution, expense, urban sprawl, crowding and crime combined with the hit film *Lion* to do wondrous work for Tasmanian real estate agents. The wealthy now escape by going to Hobart. Recently that city shot up to the most expensive Australian state capitol for housing. A few years ago it was still the lowest. Few Tasmanians can now afford to buy a home there and many bitterly protest.

The foreign investors, migrants, tourists and refugees have found that even their millions of dollars will usually not buy them fresh air, uncrowded beach access and quiet in the capital cities, so they are spreading out. Hobart and Esperance are only two examples. South of Sydney many Australians have left their once idyllic towns which are now so overcrowded, ugly and noisy that they cannot bear to go back there. In Sydney alone 15,000 bungalows have been bulldozed to make way for high rises which sell for around half a million each. Stacking people on top of each other in high rises means hundreds pay rates and rents where one family used to live on a quarter acre block. Money money money. The majority of Australians now believe that owning their own home has become an impossibility. Those who desire to make “a big Australia” with a population approaching eighty million are getting what they want for themselves, their investor friends and Australia’s trading partners and foreign allies. If this sounds xenophobic the biggest problem leading to the oncoming disaster are Australians. Even S.B.S. showed a Tasmanian premier inviting High ranking Chinese to his state to look over its merits and consider investment there.

Currently around 28- 30% of the population are foreign born. With their children they are already 45% of the population and that proportion increases every year. Given figures disagree, but it seems that at least 100,000 and possibly over 193,000 known migrants poured into Australia in the first four months of 2018. Even these figures exclude overseas students, refugees, illegals, permanent residents, tourists and contractors. A total of around 500,000 for all of 2018 is likely and may even be an understatement. Such statistics and those from previous years puts the spacious tranquil Australia depicted in *Breath* on a death sentence, in the few places where it still exists. If this sounds rather like a conspiracy theory check out *Breathe* posters. As a lure they offer a chance to win a free trip to Denmark W.A. the town “made famous” by the film. Travel there and the winner will probably find that those

beautiful uninhibited beaches are in national parks. Even there they probably filmed in weekdays with security guards keeping people out of the shots, or are they photo shop images? Given that the federal government is attempting to move in on some of North Queensland's protected marine areas for development and business, those beaches in *Breathe* won't be there much longer. In Australia what investors want investors get.

Television shows *River Cottage Australia*, and *Gourmet Farmer*; the glossy books *Shelter: How Australians Live*, *Australia the Beautiful* and *Australian Style* as well as films like *Danny Deck Chair* and *Lion* give an impression that Australia is a land of wealth, space, serenity and opportunity for foreigners. Very few Australians really live in the style that these works depict. Realities are showing that once again the way to wreck what will soon seem as a lost paradise is to overpopulate it. When that happens we will see more nostalgic productions for Australia in the 1970s like *Breath*. Enjoy the beaches and forests vicariously. How much better this film would have been if instead of a voice over we saw why Pikelet reminisced. A middle aged Pikelet in a high rise above a ceaselessly roaring highway would be close to reality, but that is the last thing investors want people to see.

\*