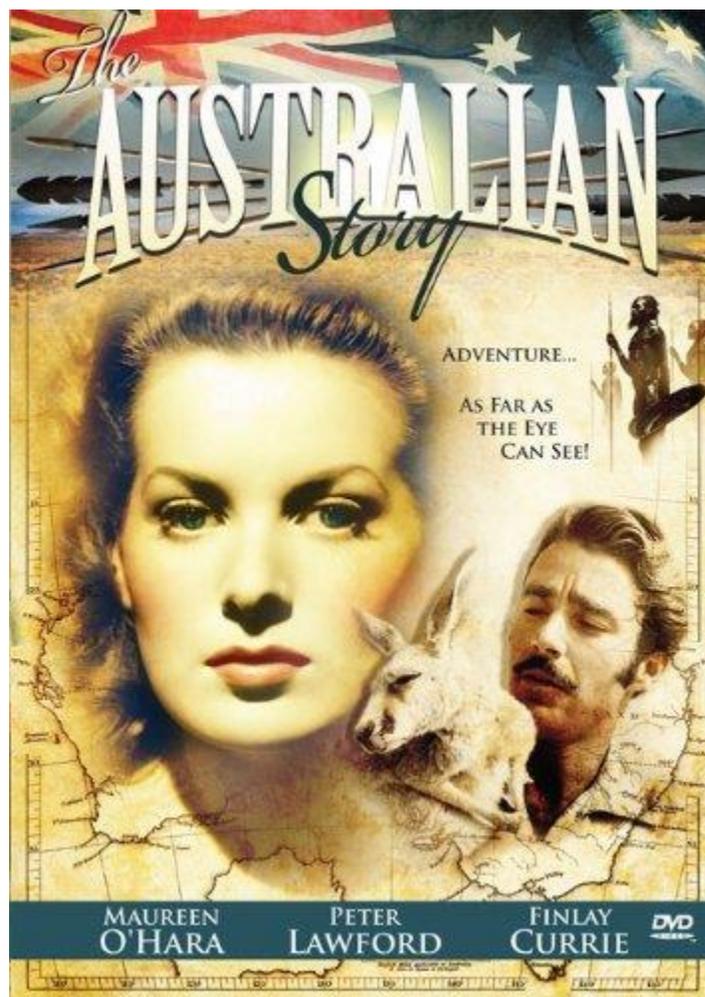


Kangaroo: The Australian Story



Reviewed by Garry Victor Hill

Directed by Lewis Milestone. Produced by Robert Bassler. Screenplay by Martin Berkeley. Cinematography by Charles C. Clarke. Art Direction by Mark-Lee Kirk and Lyle R. Wheeler. Original Music by Sol Kaplan. Extra music by Alfred Newman. Edited by Nick DeMaggio. Key Costumer: Edward Stevenson.

Cinematic length: 84 minutes. Company: 20th Century Fox. Cinematic release: 1952: DVD release 2010 restored and remastered. Check for ratings. Rating 80%.

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Cast

Maureen O'Hara as Dell McGuire

Peter Lawford as Richard Connor

Richard Boone as John W. Gamble

Finlay Currie as Mac McGuire

Chips Rafferty as Constable Len

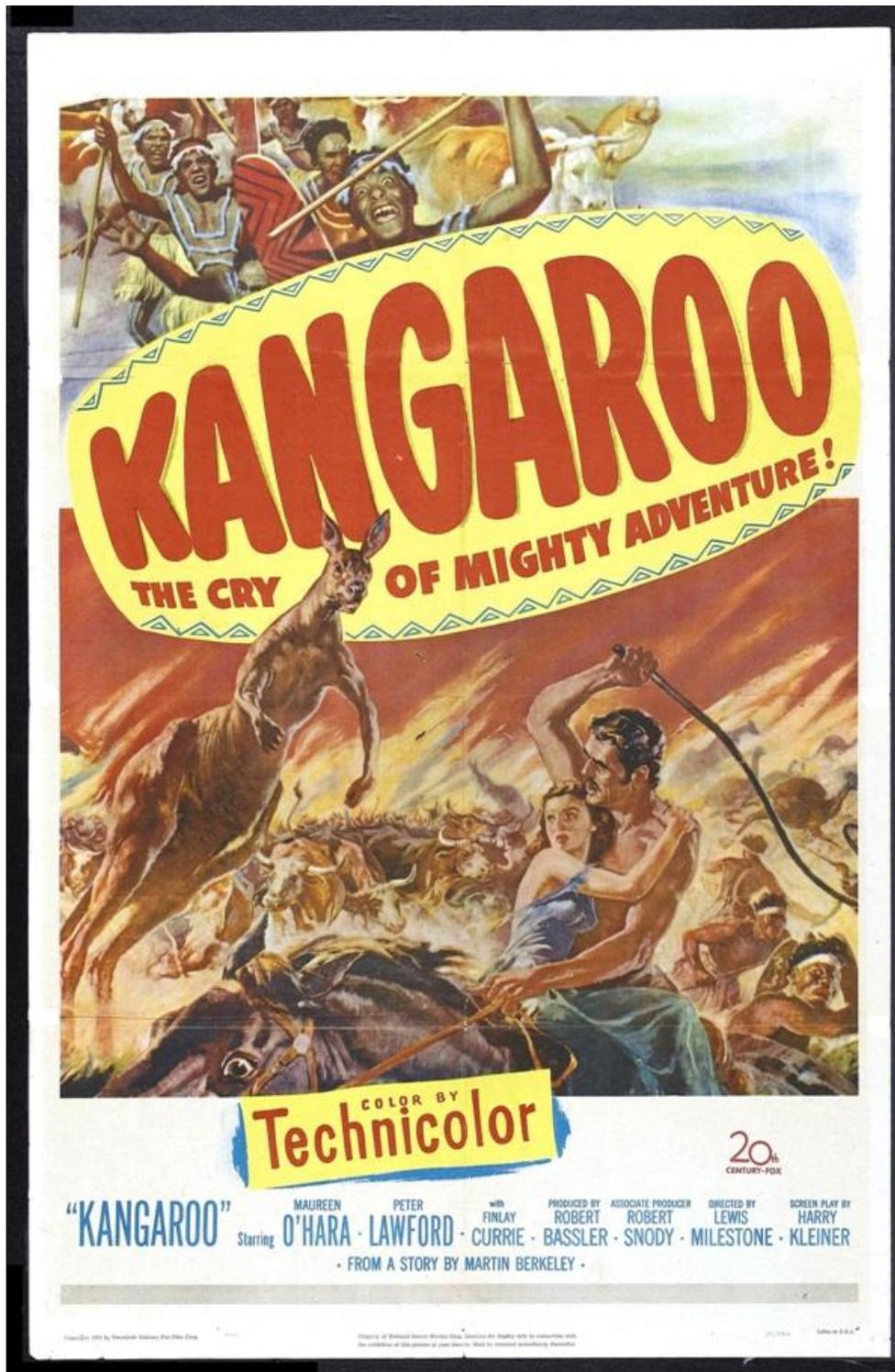
Charles 'Bud' Tingwell as Matt

Letty Craydon as McGuire's Housekeeper

Henry Murdoch as Piper

Review

This film was beset with problems. The cast, story, title and era were all frequently changed. Eventually compromises were made and they showed. The film was known as either *Kangaroo* or *The Australian Story* and then as *Kangaroo The Australian Story*. Why remains unclear. Cattle were more of a focus than the few kangaroos shown. Ultimately the film could have been set anytime between the ending of convict labour and the ubiquitous use of the automobile: dates from the 1880s to 1910 appear in studio comments. Other problems quickly emerged. Star Maureen O'Hara quickly learned to despise co-stars Richard Boone and Peter Lawford. She later recounted in her memoirs that the two men were saved from arrest in Sidney due to pressure from their film studio. Apart from the early scenes set in Sidney the setting was the drought prone Australian interior. Filmed in or near the Flinders Ranges, usually one of the driest places within the driest continent on earth, delays and reshoots were caused by untypical rain – but the story centred on a drought. Then heat caused illness leading to further delays. Kangaroos, usually so abundant, could not be found in large numbers. Finally the film was finished and released in May 1952.



The sensationalist poster promised more 'mighty adventure' drama and thrills than the modest movie contained. No impossibly gigantic kangaroos attacked. Maureen O'Hara's shoulders remained uncovered and the Aborigines politely negotiated for water.



Maureen O'Hara and Peter Lawford, despite an unfolding romance between their characters not much shows on the screen. Despite being called 'The Queen of Technicolour' Maureen O'Hara said that she hated technicolour's usual filming process as the glare hurt her eyes.



Despite an initial strong attendance soon after opening, it became a critical and commercial failure. Words like unexciting, disappointing and mediocre were used. Given the way movie posters promised an epic adventure, the disappointment was justified. The criticisms? There are too many prolonged shots of herded cattle moving along and not enough of kangaroos. The filmmakers should have included hordes of stampeding kangaroos or changed the title. Maureen O'Hara complained that too often Hollywood had her playing merely decorative roles and basically this is one of them. While what is here in her portrayal is believable, consistent and fits the story perfectly, more character development and more insights into her motivations would have made for a better film. This also applies to the rest of the cast. We see what they are like but not why and the complexities and contradictions within the human character are only occasionally shown. The exception is Finlay Currie, who presents a rounded character responding to different stimulus in sometimes contrary ways.



Finlay Currie. This still is taken from a similar role

He plays Mac McGuire, an outback station owner who first appears in Sidney, drunk and in a flophouse after failing to get a bank loan to save his drought afflicted cattle station. While there he crosses paths with Richard Connor, who he believes to be his missing son Dennis. His deluded belief, driven by his desperate

need to assuage his guilt and to find the loved missing boy motivates much of the film. The boy was briefly put into an orphanage and ran off before he could be reclaimed. MacGuire's guilt drives him to drink and other self-destructive behaviour, which means that his daughter Dell has to be his protector. Lawford and his partner John W. Gamble are on the run from a robbery gone wrong involving a shooting and so they pretend to be cattle buyers, travelling back to his station with McGuire, supposedly to pick up cattle they have purchased from him with some of their theft proceeds.



1950s studio portraits of O'Hara's co-stars, Richard Boone and Peter Lawford. Both men would go on to frequently portray villains or dubious types.

Instead they play upon the idea of Richard Connor being Dennis and drop hints so that MacGuire will continue in his belief and therefore Richard will inherit the station. MacGuire, desperate to believe even when sober, seems to fall for it. To hide out from the law and to make the station at least viable they work there. The con seems to be working, but then Richard starts to fall for Dell... Three men do not like that idea; Constable Len carrying a romantic torch for Dell, Gamble, seeing a lucrative plan going awry, and Maguire, trying to protect his daughter from what he thinks will be incest.

This makes for a different plot, set against the calamity of the drought, which all the characters have to battle. The landscape setting and the station are characters in

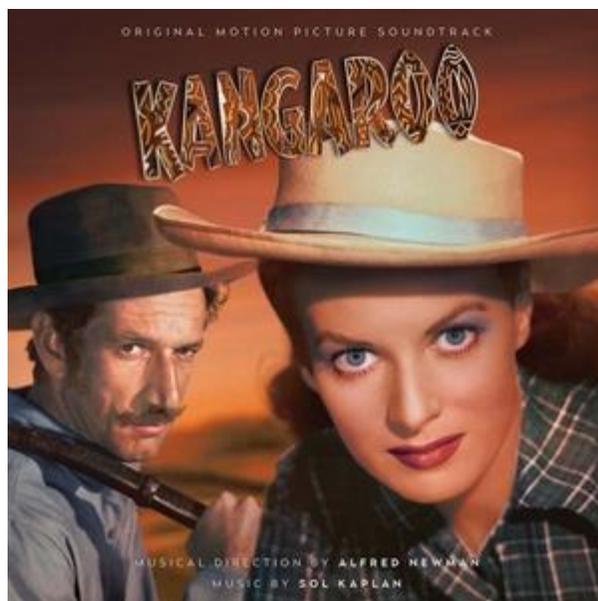
themselves and Milestone ably captures both the stark dangers and the beauty of the Australian bush well.



Landscapes like this dwarf the character's intentions and emphasise that they are battling nature to survive.

With O'Hara's alluring beauty, Currie's outstanding performance and an able cast, *Kangaroo* has several things going for it. It also has Milestone's ability to tell a simple story succinctly - except for a few minutes too long with the cows.

That simplicity and lack of high drama, which so many critics derided, actually works as a strength. This simple story about ordinary people battling the land and often their own flaws needs a simple narrative method. To make it an epic or a melodrama would make it incongruous and perhaps develop a narrative that dragged or became ponderously self-conscious. This mistake happened with recent films set in the Australian outback, *Australia* and *The Dressmaker*.



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Paramount News *****

The Cry of Mighty Adventure!

SEE! War battle lines across the wall of fire for the last vest of water!

SEE! Wild Aborigines of Australia dance the blood-dripping Corroboree!

SEE! Giant leeches, wendigos, gings, bull-heads — extinct everywhere else for 40,000,000 years!

KANGAROO
THE AUSTRALIAN STORY

"KANGAROO!" Starring MAUREEN O'HARA
PETER LAWFORD with Finlay Currie · Richard Boone
Chips Rafferty · Produced by ROBERT BASSLER · Directed
by LEWIS MILESTONE · Colour by TECHNICOLOR

20th CENTURY-FOX