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**BAZ
LUHRMANN**
ICONS OF CINEMA

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THE CURTAIN RISES...

The Showman

Over three decades, Mark Anthony Luhrmann, who goes by the moniker Baz Luhrmann, has cemented himself as one of cinema's most recognisable filmmakers. The Australian film director, producer, writer and actor has worked across television, opera, theatre and music, but it is in the cinematic realm where he has really flourished. He is regarded as a contemporary auteur renowned for his theatrical aptitude, opulent aesthetic and sweeping romances.

Luhrmann is a showman as much as a director, known for conducting dramatic narratives that play out on a flamboyantly grand scale. Culturally, his significance spans the arts as he takes classic narrative structures and morphs them through new perspectives, not limiting himself to the boundaries of realism. This signature style marks the Australian filmmaker as a pioneering storyteller where the fusion of high and low pop culture creates an entirely singular body of films.

OPPOSITE: Luhrmann on the set of *Moulin Rouge!*



Paso Doble Flare

Though Scott and Fran perform several ballroom dances throughout *Strictly Ballroom*, their rule-breaking paso doble is the most memorable. The Latin ballroom dance imitates a bullfight; the male dancer is the matador, while the female dancer is the red cape of a toreador. After another heated argument with his mother, Scott arrives at Fran's home and confesses his desire to dance with her at the competition. However, Fran's Spanish family does not warmly receive his declaration. Fran's father, Rico (Antonio Vargas, one of the world's leading Flamenco dancers), is especially suspicious of the young man and demands to see his paso doble in action.

They gather on the wooden terrace, lit by lanterns with Fran's family playing live instruments, as Scott and Fran's dance is met by taunting laughter. Rico can't just stand by and watch; he assumes the matador position, head held high with steely confidence and effortless finesse. The family form a ring in which Rico challenges Scott with a "this is how it's done" glare. They look like two bullfighters facing off. Luhrmann holds an extreme close-up on the ferocity of Rico's footwork, while the sound design focuses on the increasingly loud clicking of his heels. Rapid-fire editing cuts jump between close-ups of Rico's dancing and Scott's wonderment. The fiery



moment melts into a scene of schooling between the two men, who are very different from one another.

Rico becomes Scott and Fran's unofficial dance coach to help them perfect their paso doble. Fran's grandmother Ya Ya (Armonia Benedito) also assists: she hits Scott's chest to engrain the rhythm of the music into his soul to help him "dance from the heart". Their nightly rehearsals are brought forward into the daylight, no longer hiding in the dark – it's a subtle callback to Fran's sentiment that "a life lived in fear is a life half lived". Luhrmann characterises such scenes with a naturalistic soundtrack composed of the nearby railway station's rhythmic rattling, the family's clapping and the hammering of mops.



OPPOSITE TOP:
Fran (Morice)
and Rico (Vargas)
dance together.

OPPOSITE BOTTOM:
Scott (Mercurio)
rehearsing at Fran's
(Morice) family home.

ABOVE: Scott
(Mercurio) and Rico
(Vargas) rehearse
the paso doble.

A 21-year-old DiCaprio nailed the character's complicated breadth of reactions, cycling through all of those emotions in a few seconds. His anger is tangible in his animalistic gaze and taunting expression as he fires the gun, but then comes silence. Luhrmann cuts to an extreme close-up of Romeo's expression, DiCaprio's face the only thing visible in the frame. Romeo softens into regret as tears spill from bloodshot eyes and blood trickles down his cheeks. There is no soundtrack for Romeo's breakdown, just the patter of falling rain as he screams: "I am fortune's fool!"

Luhrmann jumps so quickly between the tranquil love and agitated violence that there is no character left untouched by the threat of death. The murders of both Mercutio and Tybalt demonstrate that this burning desire to defeat the enemy household is all in vain. Through Tybalt killing Mercutio and Romeo killing Tybalt, Romeo has not only lost his best friend but left a devastating mark on the households' rivalry. The self-destruction of youth culminates with *Romeo + Juliet's* heartbreaking conclusion as the two lovers tragically take their lives in each other's arms.



ABOVE: Romeo (DiCaprio) realises he has murdered Tybalt.

Luhrmann's Outback

On home soil, Luhrmann's epic drama captures the landscapes of Australia with wonder. This rural romance swoons over the landscapes as much as Lady Sarah and Drover's infatuation. As the pair roam across endless miles of land, driving cattle, cinematographer Mandy Walker highlights the sun-blistered Outback's unforgiving nature.

Luhrmann's signature style of visual opulence inflates with Walker's long shots of dusty scorched plains, incredible sunsets and formidable mountainous ravines. As Walker sweeps over various terrains, the aerial shots are borderline panoramic. The cinematography borrows from the classic American western – capturing cattle drives like Howard Hawks' *Red River* – with grand stories relocated to the expansive Outback. Further bolstering *Australia*, unlike Jill Bilcock's hyperactive editing, Dody Dorn and Michael McCusker take a more restrained approach. The Outback lingers on the screen so viewers can properly absorb its grandeur.

Light is a central component of Luhrmann's storytelling. Walker's wide frames find each character under the blinding Australian sun, but the exposing quality of light and the noticeable absence of it imbues *Australia's* frames with a fantastical quality. Filming in Kununurra, a remote region of northern Western Australia, temperatures soared to a gruelling 43°C and the intensity of sunlight blankets the cattle driving scenes. The sun is a guiding light but a punishing force in the treacherous and vast Never Never desert which the herders traverse.

Luhrmann's lens appreciates Australia's landscapes, whether observing King George atop a mountain or Lady Sarah trudging through the sands. The film syphons through several characters and their differentiating outlooks as Luhrmann examines the beauty of the dusty red plains while contemplating the harsh reality of the country's history.



TOP: Drover (Jackman) in the Outback.



MIDDLE: Lady Sarah (Kidman) and Drover (Jackman) in the Outback.



BOTTOM: Lady Sarah (Kidman) in the Outback.