

BAZ LUHRNANN ICONS OF CINEMA

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FSC DUMMY

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EMILY MASKELL



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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!

Luhrmann's Cinematic Universe

A chronological voyage through Luhrmann's cinematic works begins with his directorial debut, *Strictly Ballroom* (1992). The romantic comedy charting a dancer rebelling against tradition oozes with Luhrmann's love of ballroom dance.



Then came Luhrmann's sophomore feature, William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet (1996). His interpretation of Shakespeare's famous play modernised the tragedy but retained its Shakespearean English. The romantic spectacle showcased Luhrmann's ability to give an already well-known story a new lease of life.

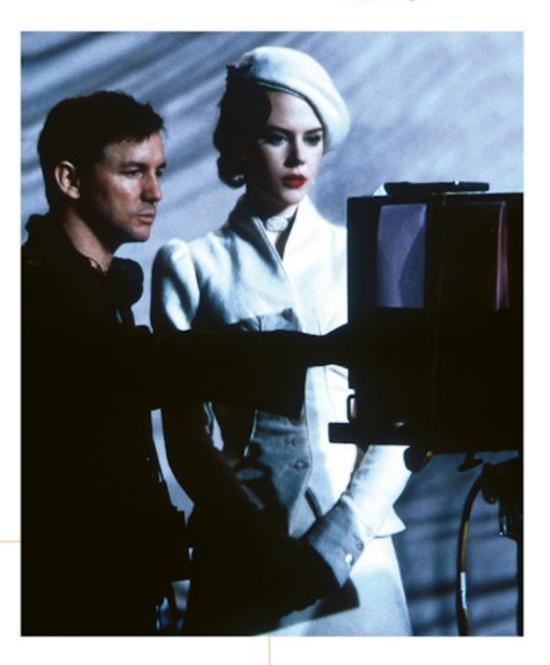


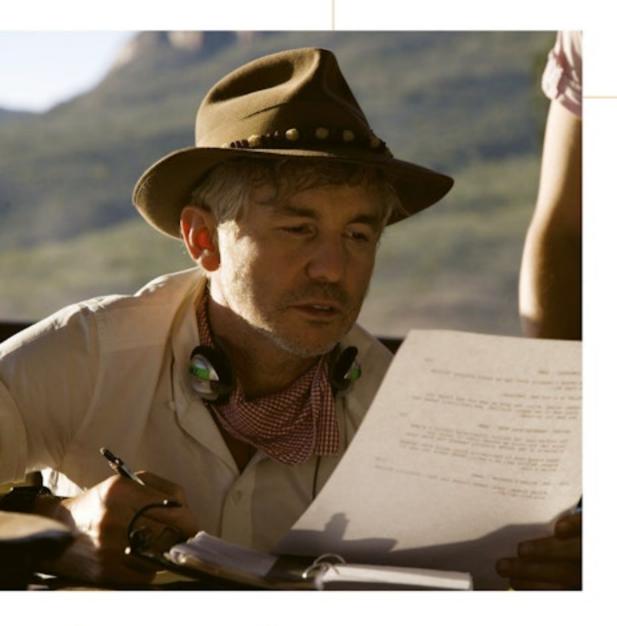
In the early 2000s, Luhrmann released Moulin Rouge! (2001), one of his greatest masterpieces. The jukebox musical romantic drama is a sonic pastiche packed with eclectic pop culture references that Luhrmann grounds in a transfixing romance.

OPPOSITE TOP: Luhrmann on the set of Strictly Ballroom.

OPPOSITE BOTTOM: Luhrmann on the set of Romeo + Juliet.

BELOW: Luhrmann directing Nicole Kidman on the set of Moulin Rouge!





ABOVE; Luhrmann on the set of Australia.

OPPOSITE TOP: Luhrmann on the set of The Great Gatsby.

OPPOSITE BOTTOM: Luhrmann on the set of Elvis. Australia (2008) saw the director venture into particularly ambitious epic territory. Set between 1939 and 1942, this dramatised character study channels grand epics of old for a love story set in northern Australia against a backdrop of World War II.



The Great Gatsby (2013), an adaptation of F. Scott Fitzgerald's 1925 novel of the same name, took Luhrmann's love of adorned excess to new heights. The glitz and glamour of the 1920s upper class becomes a playground for the director to explore.



Nearly a decade after *The Great Gatsby* comes *Elvis* (2022). Dealing with larger-than-life characters is not new for Luhrmann, but chronicling the King of Rock 'n' Roll's career is a mammoth task he thoroughly commits to.

What Makes a Luhrmann Film?

Luhrmann's filmography is an array of quirky stories united by their existence as beautiful tragedies. Infatuated with fated romances between star-crossed lovers, the director is unapologetically brazen regarding heightened emotions.

Luhrmann is known for his instantly recognisable signature style

– characteristics we'll refer to as 'Luhrmannisms' throughout this
book. A theatrical and glamorous aesthetic of excess has become
synonymous with the director. He designs cinematic spectacles to
inspire wonder; the costumes are extravagant, the editing is swift,
the soundtracks are catchy, and the scale of the films is wondrously
grand.





However, he is also a cinematic provocateur. Pulling back the curtain on his approach to filmmaking, Luhrmann deliberately exposes and exaggerates artificiality. He invites audiences to step into his sensory-stimulating cinematic worlds that embrace the sublime, the ridiculous and the romantic with open arms.

ABOVE: Luhrmann directing on the set of The Great Gatsby.

LEFT: Luhrmann on the set of Moulin Rouge!



Australia's Auteur

Born in Sydney, New South Wales, in 1962, Luhrmann's Australian identity is central to his work as a filmmaker. Not only does Luhrmann return to Australia for several films, but his cinematic motifs are firmly embedded in Australia's cultural psyche.

Luhrmann is one of Australia's most commercially successful directors. Four of his films are in the top ten worldwide-grossing Australian films: Australia is at number two, Moulin Rouge! at number six, The Great Gatsby at number seven and Elvis at number nine. Also, the director's oeuvre is lauded internationally; his films have garnered an impressive four Academy Awards, four Golden Globes and 12 BAFTAs.

Other than Strictly Ballroom (on which he was not a producer), Luhrmann has served as writer, director and producer on every film he has made, overseeing the assorted elements of costume, soundtrack and production design. Additionally, with his wife Catherine Martin, Luhrmann created his production company Bazmark in 1997, which spans films, TV, fashion and advertising.

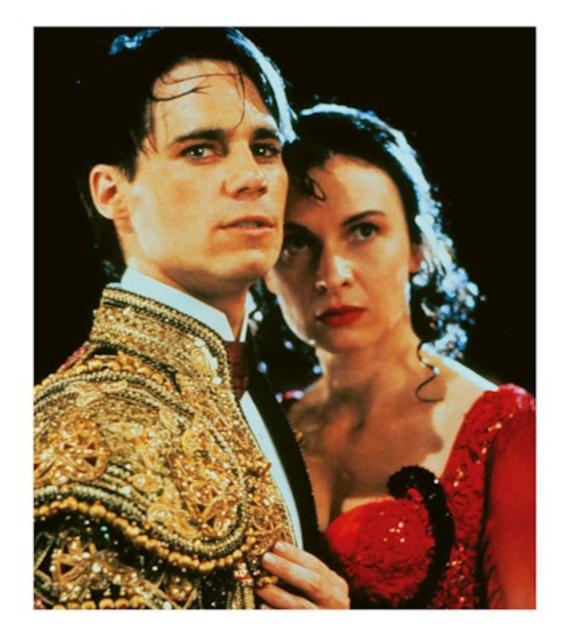


ABOVE: Luhrmann and Catherine Martin at the 2002 Vanity Fair Oscar Party.

OPPOSITE: Luhrmann and Kidman at the 54th Directors Guild Awards.

The Red Curtain Trilogy

"The show will be a magnificent, opulent, tremendous, stupendous, gargantuan bedazzlement," says Harold Zidler (Jim Broadbent), the owner of the Moulin Rouge in Luhrmann's 2001 film. Though he is describing a musical within the film, Zidler's sentiment is true of Luhrmann's entire Red Curtain Trilogy.





Luhrmann himself grouped his first three features and gave them the Red Curtain label to define the elevated style that unites them. There is no plot connection between the three movies. Instead, it is the commitment to intense theatrics that links the trio. In Strictly Ballroom, emotion is communicated through dance; the poetry of language is central to the lovers of Romeo + Juliet; and in Moulin Rouge! the nature of theatrical performance is at the film's core.

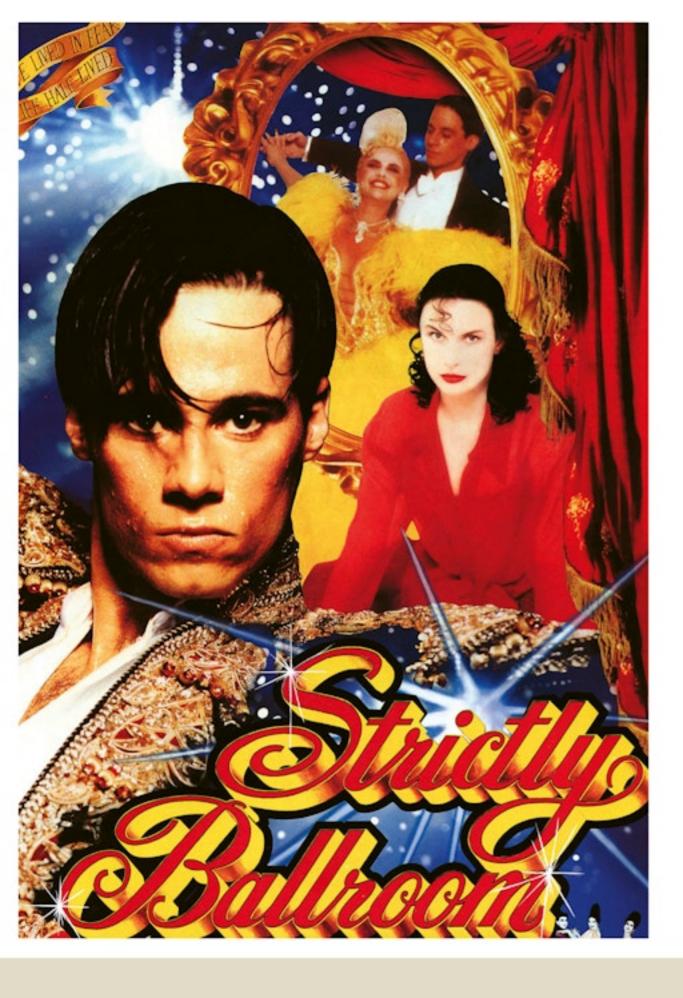
The films comprising the Red Curtain Trilogy share distinct characteristics – they each reveal the film's ending in the opening moments, and they are all set in a heightened world – but above all else, these films feel more connected to the world of theatre than to that of filmmaking. Built around amplified entertainment, this story trilogy is intended to enthral and amuse with engrossing stagecraft transformed for the screen.



OPPOSITE: Scott (Paul Mercurio) and Fran (Tara Morice) in Strictly Ballroom.

ABOVE: Juliet (Claire Danes) and Romeo (Leonardo DiCaprio) are in love.

LEFT: The dramatic cabaret in Moulin Rouge!



STRICTLY BALLROOM

A Cinematic Debut

The year was 1992 when Luhrmann burst into the world of cinema with his feature debut, Strictly Ballroom. The Australian romantic comedy is a love story and a love letter to the cutthroat world of competitive ballroom dance. Strictly Ballroom's infectious energy, theatrical storyline and bold, metaphorical visuals foreground Luhrmann's instantaneously striking signature style.

Strictly Ballroom originated as a short stage play devised by Luhrmann and fellow students in 1984 during his studies at Sydney's National Institute of Dramatic Arts. Alongside Craig Pearce, Luhrmann expanded the comedy-drama script, adding more developed thematics to the underdog narrative for the 1986 Czechoslovakian Youth Drama Festival.

The story goes that during the play's run at Sydney's Wharf Theatre in 1988, music executives who would go on to found M&A Productions became enchanted by Luhrmann's vision. M&A Productions approached Luhrmann to adapt his play for the screen. He agreed – on the condition that he would direct. Australian writer Andrew Bovell was brought on board to translate Luhrmann's story



OPPOSITE: The Strictly Ballroom poster.

ABOVE: Luhrmann and the Strictly Ballroom cast at the film's premiere. from stage to screen. Also, Pearce reinstated his co-writer credit to channel the play's theatrical grounding.

Luhrmann's ambitious first Red Curtain Trilogy film faced hardships in production, with a slim AUD three million budget. The production team had to get crafty with money-saving options, including shooting performances in a real competition at Melbourne's Sports and Entertainment Centre. Despite these workarounds, Strictly Ballroom's flashy blend of romance and comedy charmed audiences and collected an impressive AUD 80 million at the worldwide box office, making it one of the most successful Australian films ever.



ABOVE: Ballroom dancers (Leonie Page, Gia Carides, Sonia Kruger).

OPPOSITE BOTTOM: Liz (Carides) and Scott (Mercurio) dressed ready for the competition...

OPPOSITE TOP: Two young dancers

(Lauren Hewett and Steve Grace).

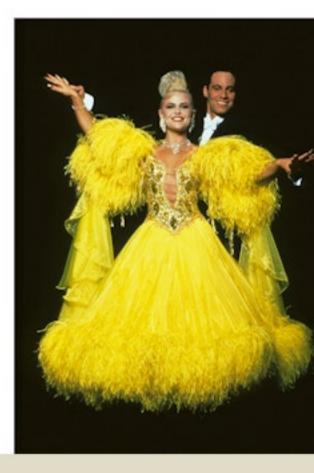
A Familiar Story

When it comes to their debut film, a director's choice of story is always revealing, and Strictly Ballroom holds a quietly poignant familiarity for Luhrmann. The film is loosely inspired by the director's youth studying ballroom dance as a child. Like Strictly Ballroom's protagonist, Scott Hastings (Paul Mercurio), Luhrmann's mother was a ballroom dance teacher. Though the characters aren't exact copies of people from Luhrmann's life, there is an undeniable connection underscoring Strictly Ballroom.

The film was also partly inspired by the life of the late Keith Bain, a pioneer of modern Australian dance as an Australian Ballroom Exhibition Champion and Latin-American Champion. Though his entry into competitive ballroom dance entertained the crowd, his inventive and untraditional style bewildered the judges. Strictly Ballroom implants Bain's isolating experience of professional ballroom rejection into Scott's character.

Luhrmann's film provides an immediately intense welcome to the glitzy but garish world of





ballroom dance as viewers chassé onto the dance floor alongside the competitors of the Southern Districts Waratah Championships. Midroutine, Scott commits a ballroom cardinal sin and breaks out "his own flashy, crowd-pleasing steps" consisting of unchoreographed, wild spins and floor slides that disgust the judges as well as his dance partner, Liz Holt (Gia Carides). Luhrmann's lens, though, is in awe of such movements; extreme slow motion narrows attention to Scott's unexpected execution.

Scott returns to Kendall's School of Dance – where his mother, Shirley (Pat Thomson), and her long-time dance partner, Les Kendall (Peter Whitford), coach up-and-coming talent – to be reprimanded for his non-federation floor craft. He struggles to deal with a furious mother, the loss of his dance partner, and the judgement of the Ballroom Confederation's chagrin hanging over him. Here, Luhrmann demonstrates that the medium of dance is a form of dialogue. While Scott and Les argue about the approaching Pan Pacific Ballroom Championship, the two men tango. It's a dance of confrontation which fosters a stealthy but majorly dramatic attitude. Luhrmann amps up the scene's intensity with swift shots that move alongside the pair's staccato movements, keeping up with their pace as rebellion confronts tradition.



The meeting of Scott and Fran (Tara Morice), a young Spanish-Australian "beginner", also sees dance choreography become a dialogue. Enthralled by Scott's unorthodox moves, Fran pitches herself as his dance partner. The scene becomes a visual poem: they dance the rhumba ("the dance of love") to the instrumental opening of Cyndi Lauper's 'Time After Time' under dramatic chiaroscuro lighting. They hold intense eye contact as their torsos move close, and wobbly first steps develop into a synced rhythm. Cinematographer Steve Mason's camera dances with them as Luhrmann foreshadows romance in movement, not words.

RIGHT: Fran (Morice) ready to dance the paso doble.

OPPOSITE: Fran (Morice) holds Scott (Mercurio) in a dip.



Breaking the Mould

simplifies his stories to a singular genre identifier; Strictly Ballroom is neither a romance, a drama, or a musical but intertwines conventions of all three. On the surface, the film is a love story between

Luhrmann has never been a filmmaker who abides by convention nor

ballroom dancers. But look deeper: you will uncover an allegory of individual revolt and a commentary on the indispensability of artistic expression.

Both Scott and Luhrmann are mavericks who sidestep tradition. Luhrmann's film centres on the fallout of stifled self-expression. "I'm

sick of dancing somebody else's steps all of the time," Scott proclaims, frustrated by the uncompromising and rigorous rules. Strictly Ballroom also departs from expectation with its boisterous sense of comedy. From characters falling on freshly mopped floors to some intentionally bad wigs, the breaks from the competitive plot see Luhrmann bring a sense of playfulness to his direction. Humour is epitomised in the iconic scene where Liz pleads for their rival, Ken (John Hannan), to enter and declare: "Pam Short's broken both her legs, and I want to dance with you." Her wish comes true. Mere seconds after her plea, this exact event then plays out.

LEFT: Fellow competitors Ken (Hannan) and Liz (Carides).

For all its embedded rebellion, Strictly Ballroom does see Luhrmann contrasting Scott's novel moves with traditional aspects of the ballroom dance. The rhumba is an integral marker for Scott and Fran's budding romance, and backstage at the State Championships, the pair quietly dance the steps. For Luhrmann, it's a hugely stripped-back scene as Scott realises it's not winning he desires, but Fran. Luhrmann frames their passionate but unshowy dance against a red curtain backdrop in a two-shot that smoothly moves with their steps. It's a significantly different presentation than the bold make-up and high hairdos on the other side of the curtain.

Relying on the rhumba's slow but sensual movement, Luhrmann's implication of brewing infatuation is clear; Scott and Fran's connection isn't limited to the dance floor. Luhrmann shoots Scott's confession to Fran with a chain link fence separating viewers and the lovers. However, when they lean in to kiss, the camera moves beyond the chain link barrier; it's a visual metaphor of the wall between acting and reality crumbling as the dancers take their romance off the dance floor.

Alongside Luhrmann's two protagonists, Scott's discreet father, Doug (Barry Otto), has a significant subplot surrounding unconventional choreography. During an evening rehearsal, Scott and Fran hear someone in the building, so they flee to the rooftop. Luhrmann initially follows them before panning down the building's exterior and re-entering the dance studio through a window to see a man emerge from the shadows. It's Doug. The stiff, unassuming middleaged man steps into the spotlight and suddenly bursts into dance, wild moves which share a likeness with his son's steps.

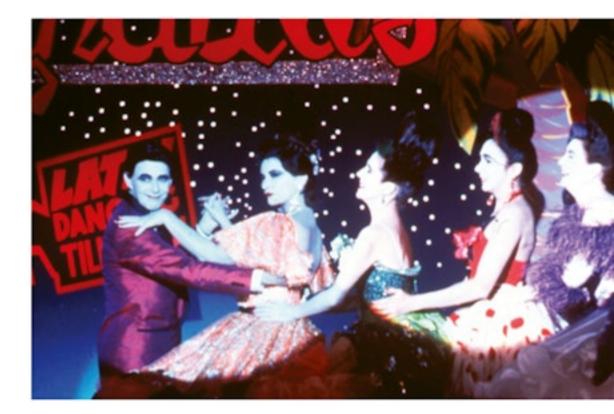
OPPOSITE: Fran (Morice) and Scott (Mercurio) ready to dance the paso doble.





It's not until just before the Pan Pacific Ballroom Championships that Scott discovers his father's love affair with dance. Les breaks the news to him – that Doug was "potentially the greatest ballroom dancer this country has ever seen" – in an attempt to warn Scott against following in his father's footsteps. Luhrmann zooms in on an image of Doug and Shirley dancing, transporting viewers back to 1967 when the couple were ballroom champions. But Doug's enamoration with improvised dance leads the federation to expel him. He is so heartbroken he vows to never return to the dance floor. A theatre play illustrates this narrative from the past – it's not only a meta nod to Strictly Ballroom's origin but a reinforcement of the layers of showmanship performativity within Luhrmann's film.

OPPOSITE: The contrasting male figures in Scott's (Mercurio) life include Doug (Barry Otto), Barry (Bill Hunter) and Les (Peter Whitford). BELOW: Scott's father, Doug (Otto), went rogue with his different ballroom steps.



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.



Meaning is not only conveyed via their movement but also through their garments. Ya Ya stitches Fran's homemade dress skirt, the flowing vermillion fabric accentuating her steps. Despite the restraints of a limited budget, the glamorous Flamenco-inspired dress that Fran goes on to wear at the championships is visually triumphant, with its heavy jewelled ruffles and elaborate layers.

Fran's look directly contrasts with ballroom costume designer Angus Strathie's kitsch creations that externalise the inner workings of absurdly satirical characters. The federation costumes provide a superficial veneer – neon blue eyeliner, fake tan and ostrich feathers – which is perfect for the dance floor but a stark contrast against Fran's homemade, meaningful dress. Scott's bejewelled matador jacket is also a noteworthy look. The golden, glittering costume is like a suit of armour donned to go into his final battle; Scott exudes heroism as he rises to the challenge of confronting the federation's perspective.

OPPOSITE: Ya Ya (Benedito) admiring the dress she made for Fran (Morice).

RIGHT MIDDLE: Costume designer Catherine Martin with Strictly Ballroom performance costumes.

RIGHT BOTTOM; Strictly Ballroom costumes on display.





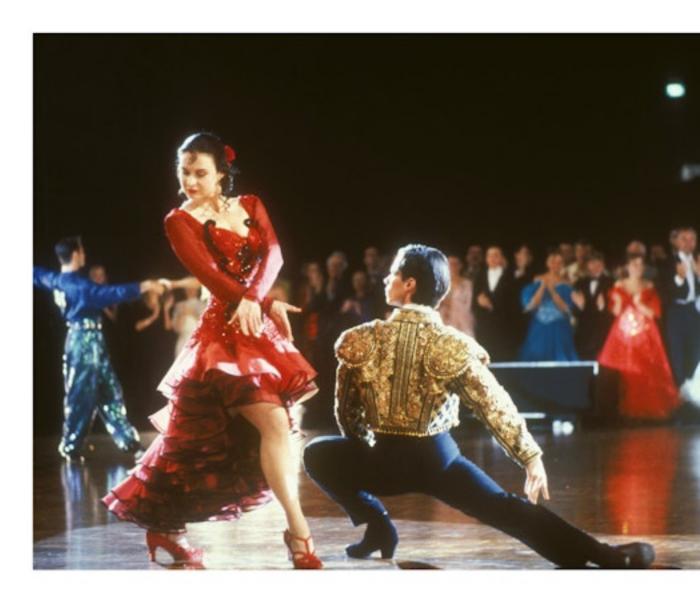
The Last Dance

In Strictly Ballroom's final moments, Luhrmann revisits notions of dance as a medium of expression. Scott freezes mid-argument with his mother as his father's voice rings out around the Pan Pacific Ballroom Championship arena: "It was the dancing that mattered... we lived our lives in fear." To this point, Mercurio's performance sees



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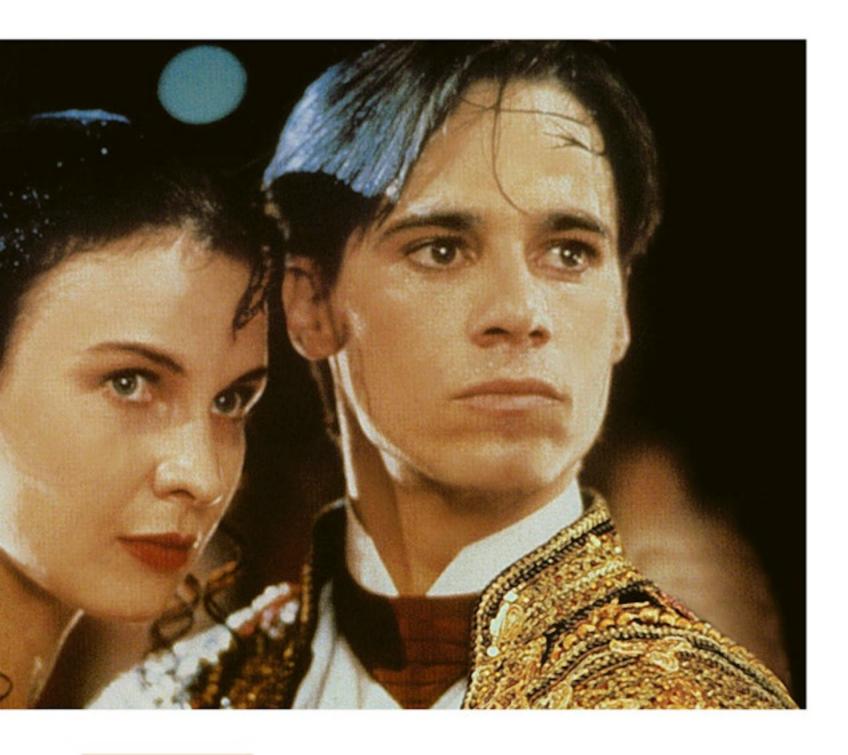
ABOVE: Rico (Vargas) and Ya Ya (Benedito) clap for Scott (Mercurio) and Fran's (Morice) final dance. OPPOSITE: Fran (Morice) and Scott (Mercurio) take to the dance floor.



Scott torn between head and heart. But this scene sees the young man soften with Fran's advice – "a life lived in fear is a life half lived" – finally making sense.

As Federation President Barry Fife (Bill Hunter) spouts that he's been rigging competitions, Scott knee-slides onto the dance floor to disrupt proceedings. Luhrmann's vibrant direction reaches its apex; under the brightest spotlight, the director holds close-ups of his determined dancers, the camera moves in line with their

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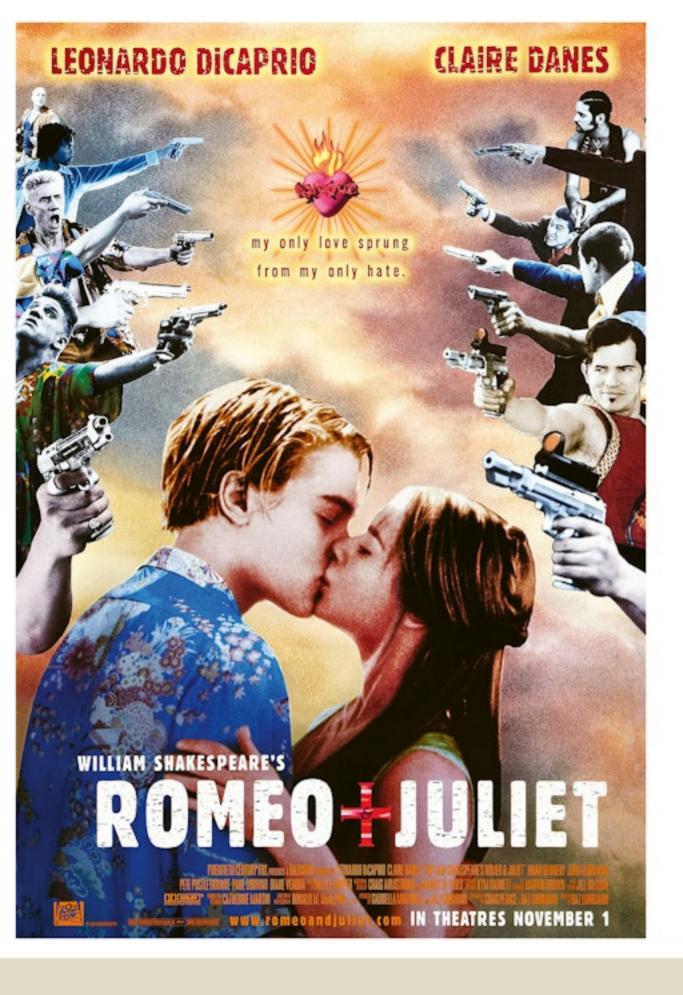


ABOVE: Fran (Morice) and Scott (Mercurio) defy the federation judges.

choreography while whooshing sound effects punctuate their spins. As expected, the federation judges disqualify them. But Fran and Scott refuse to leave the dance floor; the camera flies across the room to see them stare at the judges with the same steely confidence that Rico once faced them. A singular clap pierces through the crowd's stunned silence. It's Doug. He is creating a rhythm for them to continue dancing. For a moment, the world goes silent. Scott's racing heartbeat is the only audible noise as Strictly Ballroom's hero decides his next move: he raises his arms in a display of mutiny and begins to dance. Luhrmann shoots an extreme close-up of Scott's footwork; the roles become reversed as Rico reacts with amazement. The music resumes as Luhrmann's camera becomes Scott and Fran's third dance partner, gliding along with their perfectly executed movements, concluding with Fran's final spin as Scott rises from a knee-slide to meet her. It's a euphoric moment as the crowd goes wild and descends onto the dance floor.

Luhrmann's film leaves the question of whether Scott and Fran won the championship unanswered. Moreso, it's irrelevant. Strictly Ballroom concludes with a hero shot of Scott and Fran's kiss, a consummation of their romance perfectly timed to the swell of John Paul Young's delirious disco gem 'Love Is In The Air'. Luhrmann regards their rebellion on the dance floor as a trophy. As his camera pulls back, the dancers get swallowed by the swarming crowd. With its effervescent energy and theatrical flair, Strictly Ballroom is a perfect introduction to Luhrmann's increasingly evocative filmography.

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WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S ROMEO + JULIET

An Unsentimental Shakespearean Adaptation

Luhrmann lifted the sonnets of William Shakespeare's doomed romance Romeo and Juliet for his capacious sophomore feature. He grasped at the opportunity to go bigger and bolder following the unexpected success of Strictly Ballroom. With Romeo + Juliet, Luhrmann intended to imagine how Shakespeare would interpret his play if he were a director while making the Shakespearean world accessible to the "MTV generation". Modernising the 1597 story of two teenagers, Juliet Capulet (Claire Danes) and Romeo Montague (Leonardo DiCaprio), the director inserts countless Luhrmannisms into this timeless tale of star-crossed lovers.

Abiding by the Red Curtain Trilogy formula, Luhrmann quickly establishes the film's relationship with the source text. Utilising Shakespearean prose and playfully capturing the rhythm of Shakespeare's iambic pentameter, Romeo + Juliet sees some of the playwright's most quotable lines delivered in new and imaginative ways. For instance, the famous prologue – "Two households, both alike in dignity, in fair Verona, where we lay our scene" – is spoken by a news reporter explaining the ongoing conflict between the feuding



families of the House of Montague and the House of Capulet. Then, Luhrmann slams through the TV screen into a quick-fire montage of Mexico City and Veracruz, reimagining Shakespeare's Verona.

Luhrmann modernises without preciousness. For instance, he draws this story into contemporary life by swapping swords for guns, but retaining original references with pistol names like dagger and rapier. His brashly imaginative version of the play also reinterprets the feuding families as violently competitive business empires. An establishing shot of the city sees two opposing skyscrapers branded with each family name. Family representatives standing at opposite ends of Luhrmann's frame, while police discipline them over civil unrest, reinforces this visual division.

Another notable change is the diversity of characters. Though Shakespeare's play features extensively white characters, Luhrmann reinterpreted these identities for his film's casting. Take Romeo's best friend, Mercutio (Harold Perrineau); Luhrmann reimagines him as a Black, queer man who is the life and soul of the party. Mercutio arrives at Romeo's side, blasting Kym Mazelle's version of Candi Staton's 'Young Hearts Run Free'. With a diamante halter neck crop top and short shorts paired with a bright white wig, Mercutio's character is the perfect bridge between Shakespeare's dramatic writing and Luhrmann's modern theatrics.

There's also the charismatic Tybalt Capulet (John Leguizamo) with his seductively villainous entrance. Soundtracked by the fizzle of a match, the Latino man steps out at a petrol station to confront the hotheaded de facto Montague gang. With slicked-back hair and wearing a red vest branded with the Virgin Mary, Tybalt's expression sours as he spits his distaste for the word "peace". The tumultuous Tybalt is a character that Luhrmann utilises as an instigator of violence, with his pure and unwavering hatred for the Montagues, specifically Romeo. Leguizamo and choreographer John O'Connell elevated the showy character of Tybalt by designing his movement during gunfights to look like a flamenco-inspired dance – stylish but deadly.





OPPOSITE: Rival families: The House of Capulet and the House of Montague. ABOVE LEFT: Mercuito's (Perrineau) performance at the Capulet mansion. ABOVE RIGHT: Rival families: The introduction of Tybalt (Leguizamo).

DiCaprio and Danes

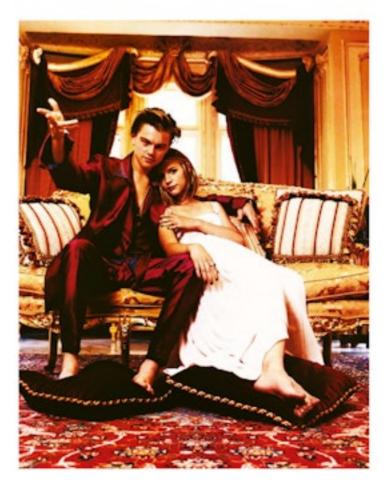
DiCaprio's Romeo and Danes' Juliet portray a seraphic side to the otherwise dark and troubled families. The actors' beguiling chemistry exudes the smitten innocence and besotted desperation of an all-consuming young love. Their youthful exuberance is so entrancing it is easy to forget about the tragic fate that lies ahead.

In Romeo + Juliet, DiCaprio's role demonstrates and advances his nineties heartthrob status. Luhrmann sets up the first look at Romeo with budding anticipation. He is perched on Verona Beach's Sycamore Grove theatre, shot from a distance and silhouetted by the hazy light of an absurdly stunning golden-hour sunset.

A slow-motion pan up Romeo's body imitates the gaze of a lingering admirer, taking in the star's sharp jawline, cherubic face and mischievous grin. Luhrmann reveals Romeo like a pin-up, with his half-unbuttoned suit and cigarette dangling from his lips as floppy blonde curtain bangs droop over his eyes. Radiohead's moody track 'Talk Show Host' soundtracks the moment, the teasing lyrics

bolstering the desire that DiCaprio summons: if you want me, come and find me – I'm waiting. He lifts his gaze directly to the camera, holding eye contact, daring viewers to tear their attention away from his alluring charm.





OPPOSITE: DiCaprio behind the scenes with Luhmann.

ABOVE: Romeo (DiCaprio) at golden hour.

LEFT: DiCaprio and Danes behind the scenes of Romeo + Juliet.





ABOVE: Juliet (Danes) stares at Romeo (DiCaprio) with wide-eyed infatuation.

LEFT: Juliet (Danes) with angel wings on her balcony.

OPPOSITE: Luhrmann and Danes behind the scenes.

Juliet's cinematic introduction is also an otherworldly moment. Viewers meet Juliet as she is submerged in the bath, holding herself underwater with her eyes wide open, experiencing a rare moment of silence in the Capulet household. She resurfaces and hurries to her mother (Diane Venora), who dresses her for the family's costume ball. Stepping onto her famous balcony, draped in a pure white dress paired with angel wings, Juliet admires the colourful fireworks overhead that also reflect on her dewy skin. This singular shot sees the meeting of Danes'



projection of ethereal innocence alongside Luhrmann's beautiful framing that renders the shot like a wistful painting.

Though Danes imbues the hopeful ingénue with a shy softness, there's no sacrifice of sharp awareness. The character vehemently rejects requests to marry eligible bachelor Dave Paris (Paul Rudd), even though he would be the answer to her family's woes. It is Romeo she craves, with her blush-dusted cheeks and wide-eyed infatuation. Under Luhrmann's direction, Danes carves a singular effigy of Juliet that honours but updates the original.

Though surrounded by wealth and privilege, Gatsby is after something money cannot buy. Five years ago, Gatsby courted Southern belle Daisy (Carey Mulligan), Nick's cousin, but lost her to her philistine husband, Tom Buchanan (Joel Edgerton), when he joined the army. Gatsby is now obsessed with recapturing Daisy, who lives across the harbour from him, and plans to reignite their dormant romance.

Luhrmann's film marked the fifth notable adaptation of *The Great Gatsby*. Departing from its predecessors, Luhrmann and co-writer Craig Pearce made noticeable changes to Fitzgerald's plot. Though Luhrmann lifted some direct dialogue from the page for the screen, he did take creative liberties that some critics felt betrayed Fitzgerald's novel. For instance, Nick's sentimental narration lures Fitzgerald's narrative into Luhrmann's histrionic realm.



ABOVE: Luhrmann directing DiCaprio and Mulligan on the set of The Great Gatsby. ABOVE: Luhrmann directing on the set of The Great Gatsby.

The Myth of Man

In *The Great Gatsby*, Luhrmann reunites with DiCaprio. 17 years on from Romeo, DiCaprio's once cherubic face has handsomely matured. With Gatsby, DiCaprio has a blank canvas to spill troubled masculinity, hopeless romanticism and tranquil fantasy.

While Luhrmann creates a world of artifice Gatsby is doing the same; he generates an illusion conjured through body, voice and history. Gatsby has layers to him – he's playing the man he wants to be, the businessman others need him to be, the lover he hopes to be and the friend he wishes he had. Through the eyes of Nick, Gatsby's theatrical layers are peeled away to reveal a man with an incompatible dream of love. His edited tales of being at war and dominating the stock market seem impressive, but Gatsby is from humble beginnings. He



was born poor and worked his way up to the top, but tug at one of his golden fraying threads and his entire life threatens to unravel. Yet he still plays the part and dons dapper suits, including a salmon pinkstriped suit, that paint him as an elegant member of high society.





OPPOSITE: Luhrmann on set with DiCaprio. TOP: Gatsby (DiCaprio) at one of his parties. BOTTOM: A younger Gatsby (DiCaprio) goes to war and leaves Daisy (Mulligan) behind.



Alongside DiCaprio's nuanced performance is the editing of Matt Villa, Jason Ballantine and Jonathan Redmond that bolsters Gatsby's self-invented mysticism. Smartly timed transition cuts imply that Gatsby is clairvoyant, knowing everything about everyone – their thoughts and feelings. He predicts encounters, worms his way into Nick's life to get closer to Daisy and anticipates phone calls. Nick recognises this side of Gatsby, comparing the man's sensitive surveillance to "one of those intricate machines that register earthquakes ten thousand miles away".

One integral scene is Gatsby's long-awaited reunion with Daisy. Gatsby arrives at Nick's home in a sharp all-white suit, a flurry of his staff in tow with excessive flower bouquets and tall cakes to impress his former lover. Because Luhrmann embeds viewers in Gatsby's momentous parties, the film's quieter moments are starkly intimate. When Daisy arrives, Gatsby goes from a charismatic man to a nervous boy: she is his weakness.

When Daisy enters, Gatsby flees outside into the rain and re-enters through the front door. He pushes back his sopping wet hair, the dishevelled exterior now matching the frazzled interior. Luhrmann draws closer to each one of them, holding centrally framed close-ups. With her sleek blonde bob and elegant lace dress, Daisy is shocked to see the man, but there's an undeniable, unspoken connection. They

take their tea the same way and sip simultaneously. As they reconnect, the rain stops and the sun comes out, mirroring the illumination of their rekindled desire.

Furthermore, the pulsing green light at the end of the Buchanans' dock embodies Gatsby's longing for Daisy. The luminescence becomes symbolic in *The Great Gatsby* as if Gatsby's pure desire for Daisy fuels its brightness.







OPPOSITE: Gatsby (DiCaprio) seems frustrated on the phone. TOP: Gatsby (Luhrmann) sits waiting for Daisy (Mulligan).

MIDDLE: Daisy (Mulligan) arrives at Nick's (Maguire) flower-covered home. BOTTOM: Daisy (Mulligan) and Gatsby (DiCaprio) are reunited.



The Roaring Twenties

The Roaring Twenties, a period of rapid economic growth and social change, is the perfect setting for Luhrmann to invest in heightened, superfluous glamour for his sybaritic extravaganza. Luhrmann's poetic fancy is divided between the old money of East Egg, Gatsby's West Egg riches, and the wasteland of Valley of Ashes that lies in between. It is Gatsby's mansion where Luhrmannisms are dialled up to the max, with weekend parties that showcase the seductive nature of riches. Cinematographer Simon Duggan's camera swoops through the kaleidoscopic parties that Nick likens to "an amusement park".

Dramatic organ music accompanies Nick gawking at the ridiculous lavishness of Gatsby's home: roulette tables, swimming pools, floor-to-ceiling libraries and ballrooms galore. There is a self-aware superficiality to these sets that reflect the style of 1920s Hollywood Regency, characterised by gilded accents, velvet fabrics, mirrored furniture and sparkly chandeliers. However, the high-gloss sumptuousness of interior design appears desperately lonely when Gatsby wanders the expansive halls alone.



OPPOSITE: Gatsby's (DiCaprio) impressive mansion. TOP: Gatsby (DiCaprio) lounging in his lavish home. BOTTOM: Gatsby's (DiCaprio) fancy parties.



but Luhrmann is careful to present this fantasy as, quite simply, a fantasy. The surface superficiality of Gatsby's weekend parties is all a ploy to reunite with Daisy. He is hopeful his love will transcend time and place in what is a fantastical assertion. Gatsby is the ultimate dreamer: it flows in his blood, but The Great Gatsby ultimately finds and exposes the cracks in this dreamy facade. For all its gorgeous opulence, Luhrmann's film lands as a cautionary tale about self-delusion.

Gatsby's guests flock to his parties in a flurry of diamonds and sequins. Their eye-catching exteriors allow a projection of one's ideal self. The costume designer, once again Catherine Martin, altered pieces from the Prada and Miu Miu fashion archives to elevate 1920s-inspired looks for a modern audience with European flair and highly sophisticated elegance. Instead of pushing for historical accuracy, Martin worked off 1920s silhouettes to create nostalgia for the ultra-luxe flapper style. It is easy to get swept up in the excess,

ABOVE: Gatsby's (DiCaprio) party is in full swing. OPPOSITE: Daisy (Mulligan) lounging in an elegant dress.



A Weekend at Gatsby's

The illicit but fated romance between Gatsby and Daisy prompts emotional swells in Luhrmann's plot. After the pair reunite, a montage-like arrangement sees them living out their perfect fantasy, frolicking under the glowing sunshine.

The lovers then admit their feelings scored to Lana Del Rey's haunting 'Young and Beautiful'. The film's soundtrack is a heady fusion of contemporary hip-hop with 20th-century jazz. In this sequence, the arresting lyricism about being apprehensive towards love comes from the perspective of Daisy. As in Romeo + Juliet and Moulin Rouge!, Luhrmann does not utilise music as a backdrop but as a direct articulation of internal thought. Del Rey's song seems to take the words right out of Daisy and Gatsby's mouths.



LEFT: Gatsby (DiCaprio) and Daisy (Mulligan).

OPPOSITE TOP: Gatsby (DiCaprio), Daisy (Mulligan), and Tom (Edgerton) descend to the dance floor.

OPPOSITE BOTTOM: Nick (Maguire), Gatsby (DiCaprio), Daisy (Mulligan) and Tom (Joel Edgerton) at Gatsby's party. When Daisy finally attends one of Gatsby's opulent weekend parties, she arrives with her husband. Throughout the night, Luhrmann repeatedly frames Daisy's lover and husband on either side of her. Though it's Tom's arm she holds onto upon arrival, it's Gatsby's hand she takes on the dance floor. Also, Luhrmann implements the framing device when these characters take a seat – Luhrmann's camera is placed at Daisy's eye level, admiring her sparkly headband and pearl bracelet. In the background, slightly out of focus, Tom and Gatsby are framed as if perched on her shoulders. They appear like a devil and an angel looming over her body. The confrontational shot heightens the rivalry that is escalating.







Later, this shot is transposed for the topic of Daisy's infidelity. In the sweltering heat of a Plaza Hotel suite, Gatsby pleads for Daisy to reveal to her husband that she never loved him. Luhrmann bounces between a close-up of the disbelieving Tom while Gatsby and Daisy share the frame. As Gatsby keeps begging Daisy to confess, Luhrmann finds Tom centred in the background of their two-shot as if he is driving a physical wedge between the pair. It is a reversed mirror of the shot where Daisy is centred: a position of power where Daisy can choose between the men. When this shot applies to Tom, it reinforces his refusal of Daisy's freedom and knowledge of Gatsby's lies that keep the lovers apart.

To this point in the scene, cinematographer Duggan's frames are fixed shots. That all changes when Tom reveals Gatsby's illegal dealings and self-conducted illusions. Luhrmann's camera hastily swaps between four different angles of Gatsby grabbing Tom and raising his fist, a suddenly dynamic scene that spikes the film's pacing. A red-faced Gatsby menacingly stands over Tom, screaming from a Dutch angle – the tilted disorientation emphasises the uncharacteristic nature of this hysterical outburst. In seconds, Gatsby's face soothes as he realises he has shown his cards and revealed a version of himself that he had been trying so hard to conceal. He stands up, pushes his hair back into place and re-buttons his suit jacket. But it's too late. Gatsby has sealed his fate and lost his biggest dream: Daisy.



OPPOSITE: Tom (Edgerton) stands between Daisy (Mulligan) and Gatsby (DiCaprio). ABOVE: Gatsby (DiCaprio) is about to throw a punch.

Under the Eyes of God

Stood in the Valley of Ashes, a billboard of Dr T.J. Eckleburg's blue eyes watch over disasters with an omnipresence. The eyes seem to stare towards the apex of Gatsby's end, his assassination – which plays out in Luhrmann's film, unlike Fitzgerald's text – enthrallingly foreshadowed. On the ill-fated trip to the Plaza Hotel, Gatsby drives Daisy while Tom chauffeurs Jordan (Elizabeth Debicki) and Nick. The latter peels off the road to fill up with fuel at George Wilson's (Jason Clarke) garage – the man whose wife, Myrtle (Isla Fisher), Tom is having an affair with. In a cruel twist of fate, if he had not stopped, Myrtle would not have seen Tom driving Gatsby's car, a vehicle that would later kill her. There, with an omnibenevolent gaze, Dr T.J. Eckleburg's disembodied eyes stare into Nick's soul to warn him of the forthcoming disaster.

When the group returns, Gatsby and Tom have now swapped cars. Myrtle runs in front of Gatsby's car, mistaking the driver for Tom. She is struck and instantly killed. Dr T.J. Eckleburg's persistent stare watches over the chaos as if it's been expecting such catastrophe. Those blue eyes of tragedy are even present as Gatsby meets his end.

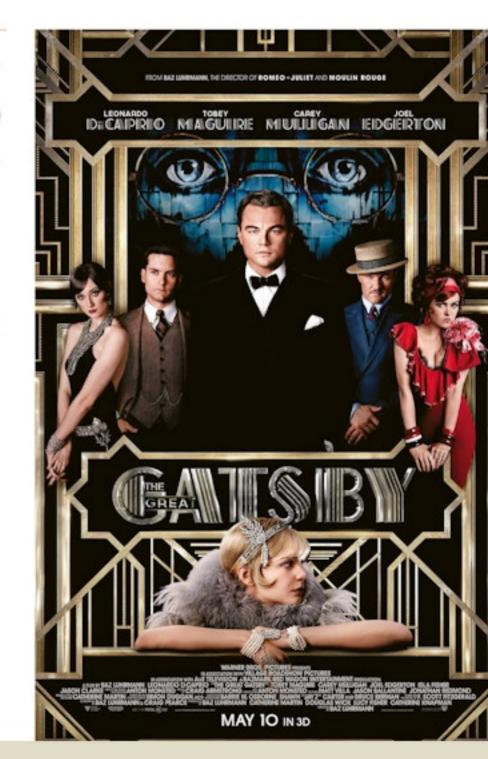


After the death of his wife, George sets off on a revenge rampage, and Tom directs his anger towards Gatsby, framing him as Myrtle's lover and killer. Unaware, Gatsby is taking his last swim of the summer. His phone rings – expecting it to be Daisy declaring her love. When Gatsby begins to climb the pool ladder, his crystal azure eyes are strikingly familiar.

OPPOSITE LEFT: Nick (Maguire), Jordan (Debicki), and Tom (Edgerton) driving.

OPPOSITE RIGHT: Tom (Edgerton) at George (Clarke) and Myrtle's (Fisher) garage.

RIGHT: Dr T.J. Eckleburg's eyes in the background of The Great Gatsby poster.





Blue eyes project admonishment, but this time, it is not Dr T.J. Eckleburg's gaze on Nick, but Gatsby's eyes staring at the viewer. He is just about to leave the pool when George pulls the trigger. Gatsby's face breaks into shocked anguish as he realises his dreams are over; Luhrmann's film falls into a rare silence before Gatsby falls backwards into the pool with a loud splash.

Luhrmann's camera whizzes across the harbour to Daisy's house in time with Gatsby's last inhale. As he releases a wounded exhale, the camera boomerangs back. As Nick puts it: "His dream must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it. He did not know that it was already behind him." Luhrmann's tragedy ends with Gatsby's death as he believed he was so close to winning Daisy's heart. The heartbreak is as cataclysmic as Satine's curtain call or Romeo and Juliet's end in the Capulet tomb.

It was not Daisy calling for Gatsby, but Nick. For him, the sound of a bullet down the phone marks the death of the American Dream. Luhrmann implies it, too – if Gatsby could not achieve his dream



surrounded by the vast carelessness of the rich, what hope do the rest of us have? As Luhrmann's film concludes, the pulsing green light on the Buchanans' dock reappears. In Gatsby's last moment, he believes Daisy is within reaching distance, but the glowing beacon that held his hopes gets lost amidst the mist.

It is clear the love that Gatsby fostered for Daisy could never be realised, despite the elaborately constructed persona he devised for her. There is a double-lensed romanticism to the film: not only is Gatsby's version of Daisy conjured after years of fantasising, but there is also the version of Gatsby that Nick nostalgically portrays. Though

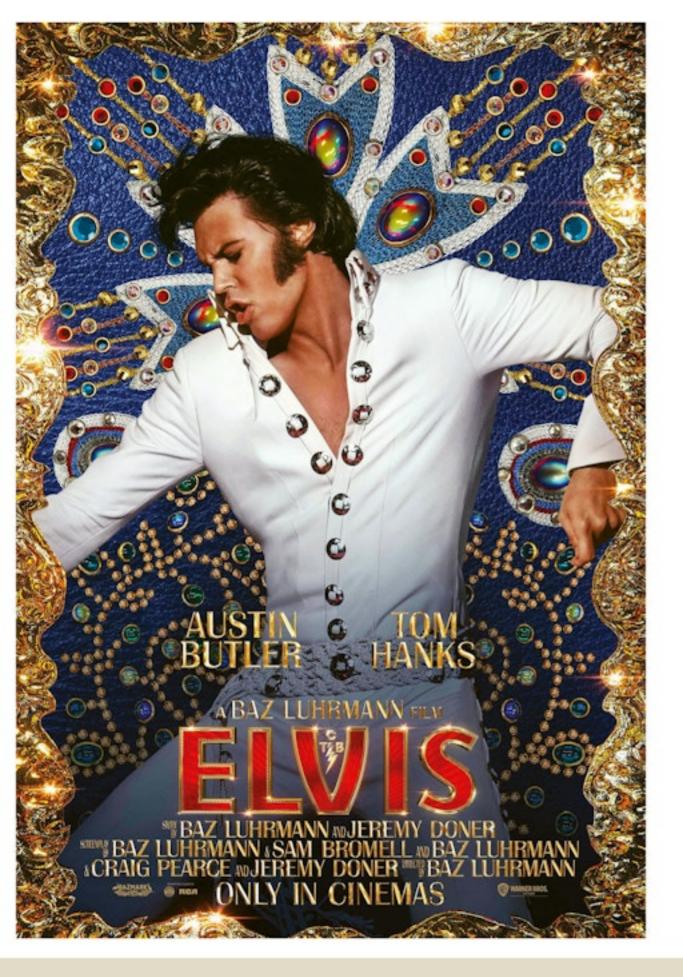
this narrator revisits his memories of Gatsby, Luhrmann leaves it up to us to ponder who exactly is the *real* Gatsby: a financial crook, a great man, or a myth that proliferated beyond expectation. We get to decide.

OPPOSITE TOP: Gatsby (DiCaprio) rises from his swimming pool.

OPPOSITE BOTTOM: Nick (Maguire) makes his last phone call to Gatsby (DiCaprio).

RIGHT: Gatsby (DiCaprio) and Daisy (Mulligan) dance.





ELVIS

LEFT: The Elvis movie poster. BELOW: Luhrmann and Butler posing on the red carpet.

The King of Rock 'n' Roll

With Elvis Presley, Luhrmann finds his ultimate match in showmanship. The director revives the King of Rock 'n' Roll for this grand jukebox biopic to chronicle the pinnacle of his fame, when the mythic musician became a symbolic cypher of innovation instead of skin and bones. For Luhrmann, Elvis was an object of childhood fascination sparked by the singer's stint in Hollywood. However, in watching the timeless icon's life play out, Luhrmann has remarked that he came to understand Elvis's life as a sort of Shakespearean tragedy. With *Elvis*, Luhrmann asks what the star means to an audience today by retracing the sonic legend's steps to becoming a worldwide phenomenon.

Bringing the King of Rock 'n' Roll back to life is no easy task, but Luhrmann struck gold with Austin Butler. The actor submerged himself in the world of Graceland, extensively studying everything and anything Elvis-related. Butler's portrayal is not an imitation





but an uncanny emulation of Elvis's vocal timbre and rhythmic movement. Butler executes this so well that pre-1960s scenes feature Butler's voice overlaying recordings of the real-life Elvis – the blend between the two is seamless. Casting a little-known actor for Elvis was a calculated move from Luhrmann, ensuring a clean slate for his portrait of the singer void of previous character associations.

Luhmann kicks off with a classic Luhrmannism: beginning at the end. The introduction of Elvis's former manager, Colonel Tom Parker (Tom Hanks), sees him dying. "I didn't kill him. I made Elvis Presley," Tom croaks from a hospital bed, his IV drip framing the skyline. Tom's unreliable voiceover steers this narrative, refuting claims of his insidious nature and pleading a case of innocence. While Elvis was the showman, Tom was the snowman, a Gatsbyesque character who feeds on the success of his stars. Tom is a "mister nobody from nowhere" who seemingly materialised in pursuit of the American Dream; his name is not even Tom Parker, and he is not a Colonel. "We are the same, you and I: two odd, lonely children reaching for eternity," Tom tells Elvis, luring him into a gilded cage.

It is in a carnival house of mirrors where Tom poaches Elvis. The carnival is a perfect setting for this interaction – the circus is the American entertainment industry, a parade of flashing lights, bold colours and big smiles that is all for show – and Tom is the ringmaster of this circus. "You look lost," Tom tells a young Elvis whose refracted reflection surrounds them. Tom easily manipulates Elvis, seeing him lost in both the mirror maze and his budding career.



The pair then get on a Ferris Wheel, where Tom proposes that Elvis becomes another act in his carnival. As the Ferris Wheel lurches into action, they strike a deal while admiring the twinkling circus lights they fly above. With the hesitant blessing of his mother, Gladys (Helen Thomson), and father, Vernon (Richard Roxburgh, who plays the Duke in *Moulin Rouge!*), Elvis signs on the dotted line. With the deal, the Presley family rose from poverty and bought Elvis's dream pink Cadillac and the residence of Graceland, their home.



OPPOSITE: Butler as Elvis.

TOP: Tom (Hanks) and Elvis (Butler) on a carnival Ferris Wheel.

LEFT: Elvis (Butler), Gladys (Thomson), Tom (Hanks), and Vernon (Roxburgh) sign Elvis's contract.

Remodelling the Biopic

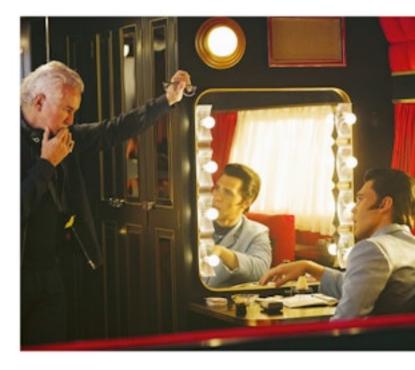
Luhrmann's Elvis is not a conventional biopic. As with all of his films, Luhrmann's signature decorative style and distinctly antinostalgic approach are branded all over Elvis. The film marks a culmination of Luhrmann's filmography. The kaleidoscopic biopic embodies the artistic dreams of Strictly Ballroom, the extravagance of Romeo + Juliet, the turbo-charged musical melodies of Moulin Rouge!, the extensive ambition of Australia and the irreverent personalities of The Great Gatsby.



ABOVE: Luhrmann, DeJonge, and Butler on set. OPPOSITE LEFT: Elvis (Butler) and Priscilla (DeJonge). OPPOSITE RIGHT: Luhrmann and Butler on set. Luhrmann situates the details of Elvis's life – his deployment in the army, his relationship, marriage and divorce with Priscilla (Olivia DeJonge), his stint as an actor in Hollywood cinema and the death of his mother – within the framework of his music career. Luhrmann jumps from performance to performance, each coinciding with chapters in the legend's life. Ultimately, the stage becomes Elvis's space for releasing pent-up emotion that ranges from fiercely frustrated to painfully heartbroken.

The lavish film follows hot on the heels of the recent releases of Hollywood music star biopics Bohemian Rhapsody (2018) and Rocketman (2019), which respectively charted the lives of music icons Freddie Mercury and Elton John. However, in charting details from an unorthodox childhood in Memphis to his untimely death, Luhrmann's recounting of Elvis's life differentiates from the film's genre counterparts with its storyteller. With Tom being the puppetmaster and Elvis the puppet, Luhrmann uses Tom's narration to highlight the good and bad of Elvis's career within the cultural context of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. In busying the chronological biopic narrative, Luhrmann departs from the typical genre template.









OPPOSITE: Elvis (Butler) graces the stage.

LEFT: Elvis (Butler) performs at the Louisiana Hayride.

BELOW: Elvis (Butler) performs to a screaming crowd.

Elvis on the Mic

Elvis's performances are set pieces that amp up volume and vibrancy which makes them perfect for Luhrmannisms. Elvis nervously steps on stage with "greasy hair, girly make-up", and a soft pink suit that enhances his dreamy aura for his first show. The opening notes of 'Baby, Let's Play House' begin, and Elvis's body begins to vibrate under the glare of a single spotlight.

Elvis's smouldering movements seem powered by the increasingly feral screams of carnal desire from the crowd. His gyrating hips prompt the first spark of intense sex appeal, and even Tom cannot rip his eyes away from his star power. This heady atmosphere informs cinematographer Mandy Walker's frenzied frames as breakneck whip pans, energetic zooms and increasingly brisk editing cuts capture Elvis's thrusting crotch and the audience's possessed shrieks. The kinetic sweeping camera seems to dance with Elvis on stage as Tom proudly declares him "the greatest carnival attraction I'd ever seen".





This first performance showcases that a star has been born and contextualises Elvis's love for music. A flashback to a young Elvis (Chaydon Jay) sees him hear the blues wail of Arthur "Big Boy" Crudup's (Gary Clark Jr.) 'That's All Right Mama', a song Elvis went on to cover. The young Elvis approaches a Black revival service in a tent that billows with the power of the worshipers' gospel melodies. Crudup's high-pitched vocals meld with Elvis's present-day low hums as the young Elvis is drawn into the centre of the crowd, arms raised and eyes closed, as music bewitches his body. Cutting from this sequence to Elvis gracing the stage, Luhrmann draws a parallel between the raised hands of worshippers and Elvis's frantic fans. Luhrmann frames these two moments as monumental; in the first, Elvis experiences what it is like to be taken over by music, and then he realises he is in possession of the power to enchant an audience with music.

The stage also becomes a pedestal for rebellion. With mounting magnetism, Elvis became a target of conservative moral panic for his power to corrupt the minds of white youth with his "hips of a Black man". Despite threats of imprisonment, Elvis brushes off the family-friendly Elvis that Tom had prepared for him. Luhrmann follows Elvis from behind as he marches onto the Russwood Park stage in 1956, his silhouette outlined by the insistent flash of paparazzi cameras. When the camera rounds Elvis, Luhmrann reveals the performer's face in a close-up that accentuates his moody stare through thick eyelashes and smoky eyeshadow.



OPPOSITE: Elvis (Butler) is watching the amusements in a carnival.

ABOVE: Tom (Hanks) warns Elvis (Butler) before he steps on stage. Tom's once hopeful expression morphs into a panicked circus master as his main act squares up to sing 'Trouble', an aptly named proto-punk rock track. Elvis sings with a growling snarl, telling the audience to look in his direction if they are looking for trouble and that he is no longer abiding by orders. He tells them he is miserable. Rescinding the commercial image, Elvis flouts the police threats as he writhes on the floor screaming, "I'm evil!" What is problematic for authorities is iconic through Luhrmann's lens. The director shoots

Elvis's concert from several angles, on and off stage, but positioning the camera in the audience embeds viewers in the hysteria and gives Luhrmann the chance to replicate the energy of what it would be like to attend the sexually charged, provocative show where Elvis swung his hips with a newfound vigour.

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BELOW: Elvis (Butler) with excited fans.



Blues and Gospel

Documenting decades of Elvis's career, Luhrmann's film spans extensive American culture and Elvis's relationship with Black artists. The singer was heavily influenced by Black musicians whose songs he would then cover for mainstream radio play; some regard it as appreciation, and others remark that it is appropriation and outright theft. Luhrmann's portrait explicitly points to the origins of Elvis's music and sets out to pay deference to the original gospel and blues artists who inspired him.

Luhrmann quickly establishes that Elvis's music is rooted in the

exemplariness of Black music – the singer frequently resides at Club Handy, a legendary Memphis club on Beale Street. Here, his personal style and acclaimed sound became informed by Black culture. At Club Handy, Elvis witnesses performances by Little Richard (Alton Mason), Sister Rosetta Tharpe (Yola), and Big Mama Thornton (Shonka Dukureh). Luhrmann makes it abundantly clear: without Black culture, we would have no Elvis Presley.

BELOW LEFT: Elvis (Butler) arrives at Club Handy.

BELOW RIGHT: Little Richard (Mason) performs at Club Handy.







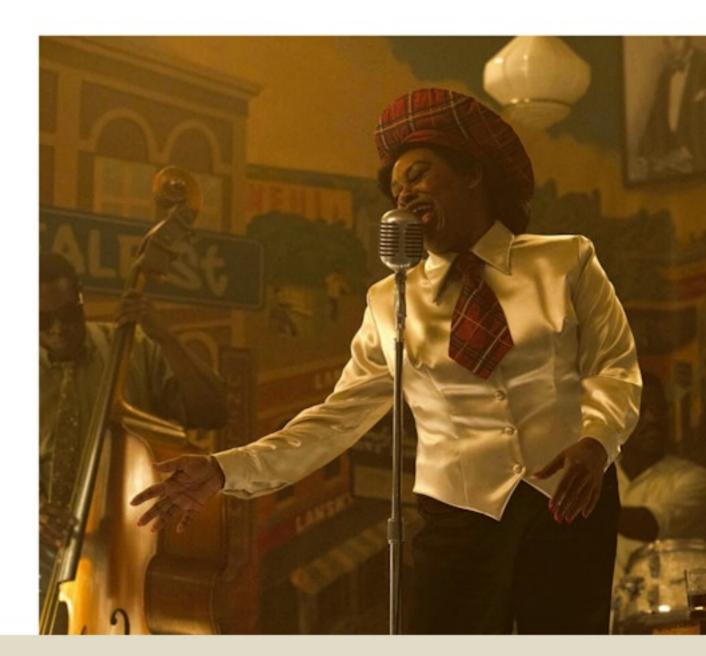
LEFT: Elvis (Butler) and B.B. King (Harrison Jr) at Club Handy.

OPPOSITE: Big Mama Thornton (Dukureh) performing at Club Handy.

Elvis does explore the sentiment that the star's whiteness enabled him to get famous by covering songs from Black origins – like Crudup's blues classic 'That's All Right Mama' and Thornton's 'Hound Dog'. Luhrmann tracks this process when Elvis and his friend B.B. King (Kelvin Harrison Jr.) are enthralled by Little Richard's 'Tutti Frutti' performance at Club Handy. King confides in Elvis that he believes Elvis could record the track and make considerably more money than Little Richard had, and he does.

Elvis's mainstream success came with a controversial tag: he could stoke racial hostility and corrupt the minds of white youth in a violation of de jure segregation. Luhrmann inserts news broadcasts of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy's assassinations in 1968, two events that Luhrmann spotlights as wake-up calls for Elvis. The singer grows increasingly paranoid about being murdered, and with Tom tightening his grip on Elvis's image as a clean-cut all-American without a blemish on his reputation, Elvis's manager silences his support of the civil rights movement.

Luhrmann also knows the power of music on an audience. The *Elvis* soundtrack transcends time and setting with music producer Elliott Wheeler's insertion of contemporary flourishes. This includes Doja Cat's 'Vegas' that samples Big Mama Thornton's 'Hound Dog' (which Elvis went on to cover) and Swae Lee and Diplo's 'Tupelo Shuffle' (which samples Elvis's cover of 'That's All Right' that plays as a young Elvis sees Crudup's original performance) alongside the blend of country, blues, and gospel that infuses the film score.



Las Vegas Tragedy

The final act of *Elvis* comes to rest in Las Vegas, beneath the bright lights and surrounding ring of slot machines. It is here that Luhrmann unravels Elvis's Las Vegas residency, looking beyond the rhinestone-encrusted glitz to find a star running out of fuel to burn. Elvis reaches the apex of his career, but his life shatters in his hands: Priscilla leaves him and takes their child with her, while Elvis drifts from his once exuberant stardom.

Elvis's five-year residence at Vegas's International Hotel begins with him performing in the now-famous white-flared jumpsuit while Tom conducts business in the crowd. He's sat with the Hotel's businessmen as they draw out a deal worth millions on the tablecloth





that would lock Elvis into performance exclusivity and wipe Tom's mountain of debt. It's no coincidence that Luhrmann times this interaction as Elvis sings 'Suspicious Minds' and tells his audience he is caught in a trap he can't free himself from. Elvis goes wild on stage like a trapped animal, as Tom agrees to the clause "as long as that boy stays on that stage".

Elvis's US tour, with all the triumphant ups and heartbreaking downs, is summarised in a frantic montage to 'Burning Love' as the years fly by and Elvis's life descends into injection

needles, rattling pill bottles and sneaking women into hotels. These moments are framed by a hazy vignette as if the world is going in and out of focus as Elvis exists in a perpetual drug-induced state. Luhrmann's film now almost exclusively positions Elvis on stage – it's here where he thrives but also where he crumbles. Luhrmann's climactic moment comes with Elvis turning on Tom during a Vegas show. "I can't get out, 'cus Colonel's got some big debts, baby," he slurs. Cinematographer Walker captures the singer sweating and clutching his head in a spinning dutch angle shot from above. The awkward camera position accompanies the unusual feat of an Elvis show falling into silence.

OPPOSITE TOP: Elvis (Butler) arrives in Las Vegas.

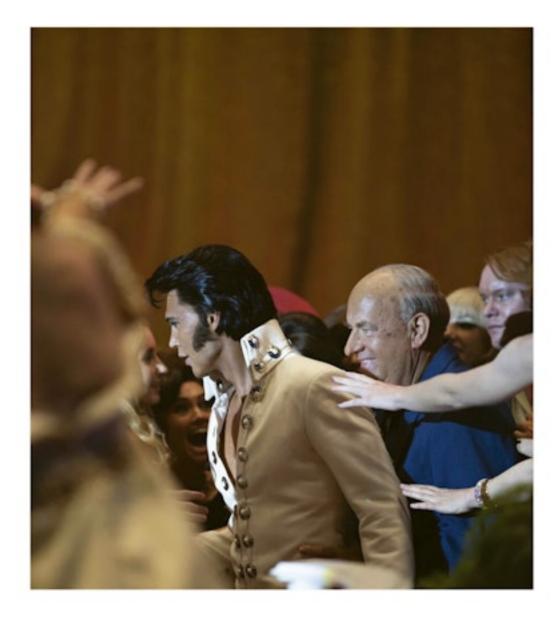
OPPOSITE BOTTOM: Elvis (Butler) at his Las Vegas residency.

TOP: Tom (Hanks) and Elvis (Butler) plan a show.

RIGHT: Elvis (Butler) collapses backstage before a show.







Elvis can stretch his wings, but he cannot fly far. Tom has ensured Elvis cannot survive without him, so their symbiotic, parasitic relationship continues. Tom's recollection of Elvis's career concludes with a show on 21st June, 1977, in Rapid City, South Dakota, with his 'Unchained Melody' performance. He's unable to stand, and his speech is indistinct, but his voice rings out with pure heart and soul. Luhrmann's final shot of his Elvis is a slow zoom, drawing closer to a headshot frame of the King of Rock 'n' Roll.

Luhrmann then hard cuts to a practically identical shot of the real Elvis singing 'Unchained Melody'. The transition from Butler to Presley is a gut punch that reinforces the legitimacy of *Elvis*. Luhrmann uses the archival material to clarify his film's relationship between fiction and reality. Concert footage alternating between home videos of Elvis, Priscilla and their child shows Luhrmann's theatrical retelling is somewhat truthful but exists at an arm's length from the real man. Luhrmann's conclusion ultimately hands his film back to the real star, giving Elvis the last word.



OPPOSITE: Elvis (Butler) and adoring fans. ABOVE: Elvis (Butler) playing the piano.

THE CURTAIN FALLS...

Heartbreakingly Beautiful Endings

As the band fades out and the curtain comes down, Luhrmann's films invariably conclude with devastating heartbreak. Though Luhrmann reveals the ending in his films at the beginning (as per the Red Curtain Trilogy), after being lost in the illustrious cinematic worlds the tragedies still sneak up on the audience.

The Australian auteur may be a polarising director because of his commitment to a heightened reality and lack of subtext. Nevertheless, his signature style is singular. Luhrmann approaches his films as if he is welcoming viewers into a story. The emotional and moral stories transport audience members into fabulous worlds where anything seems possible. However, in the final act, the delusion is shattered as Luhrmann rips away character dreams for a powerfully heartbreaking curtain call. The power of loss ripples through the director's filmography, and these agonisingly tragic endings leave Luhrmann's stories lingering at the forefront of viewers' minds.

OPPOSITE TOP: Satine (Kidman) and Christian (McGregor) duet in Moulin Rouge!. OPPOSITE BOTTOM: Gatsby's (DiCaprio) extravagant parties in The Great Gatsby.







In Another World

The wacky worlds created by Luhrmann become an escapist reality. The theatrical stories bridge film and theatre in their conception, but many of the contemporary auteur's productions have also gone on to exist beyond the silver screen.

Luhrmann's debut, Strictly Ballroom, originated on stage before the screen. But a new stage musical of Strictly Ballroom adapted the film's plot, revisiting the original story's roots. The stage musical premiered in 2014 at a Sydney theatre before moving to Melbourne and Brisbane. A further revised production had its British premiere in 2016 and North America in 2017.

The glitz, glory and grandeur of *Moulin Rouge!* also has had a second life on stage. The Piccadilly Theatre in London's West End is the home of a new incarnation of the bohemian and courtesan's love story. Bringing *Moulin Rouge!*'s hyperactive spectacle to the stage, where the film's drama unfolds, is like a homecoming for Luhrmann's glittering story.

Australia, Luhrmann's expansive portrait of his home country, has also been uniquely extended beyond its cinematic identity. When sorting through the original film of his 2008 wartime epic, Luhrmann decided to serialise Australia into a six-part series, Faraway Downs, released in 2023. The show relies on much of the nearly three-hourlong film's material but is expanded with a re-edited story, previously deleted scenes and a new score.



OPPOSITE: Scott (Jonny Labey) and Fran (Zizi Strallen) in Strictly Ballroom the Musical. TOP: The West End production of Moulin Rouge! The Musical. ABOVE: The Faraway Downs promotional poster.

Luhrmann's Cinema

Luhrmann is a showman who invites viewers into his intoxicating cinematic spectacles that are so compelling you'll never want them to end. To date, Luhrmann's six features have maintained an untampered flamboyance as he identifies beauty in even the darkest turns of his films.

Renowned for his Red Curtain Trilogy, from which Luhrmannisms were born, the director's signature style of lingering close-ups, slow-motion action shots, agitated editing, and marvellous production design is so distinctive that his filmmaking can be regarded loosely as its own genre. Strictly Ballroom, Romeo + Juliet and Moulin Rouge! sparkle with emotional poeticism while Australia is epic in proportion, The

Great Gatsby is a mystical feat, and Elvis features iconic personalities.

Outrageous characters and farfetched plots are given verisimilitude in Luhrmann's hallmark fantasies. The director unabashedly embraces the artificiality of cinema; in his universes, we dance amongst the stars while being serenaded by the



moon. So much so, if we understand cinema as the suspension of disbelief as the limits of reality dissolve, then Luhrmann's films can be regarded as the epitome of cinematic art.



OPPOSITE: Luhrmann on the set of Elvis. ABOVE: Luhrmann on the set of The Great Gatsby.



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(t) = top, (m) = middle, (b) = bottom, (c) = centre, (l) = left, (r) = right

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PREVIOUS: Satine (Kidman) and Christian (McGregor) dancing above Paris.

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