Robert Duvall...Mac Sledge  
Tess Harper...Rosa Lee  
Betty Buckley...Dixie  
Wilford Brimley...Harry  
Ellen Barkin...Sue Anne  
Allan Hubbard...Sonny  
Lenny von Dohlen...Robert  
Paul Gleason...Reporter  
Michael Crabtree...Lewis Menefee  
Norman Bennett...Reverend Hotchkiss  
Andrew Scott Hollon...Larue  
Rick Murray...Jake - Slater Mill Boys Member  
Stephen Funchess...Bertie - Slater Mill Boys Member  
Glen Fleming...Steve - Slater Mill Boys Member  
James Aaron...Henry - Slater Mill Boys Member  
Jerry Abbot...Piano - Country Blues Band Member  
Buddy Hrabal...Steel Guitar - Country Blues Band Member  
Jerry Matheny...Guitar - Country Blues Band Member  
Wayne Milligan...Bass - Country Blues Band Member  


Australian director and scenarist, writes: “I was born in Sydney, Australia, and grew up in an outer suburb of unrelieved dreariness. Like ever other film director in the world it seems I was obsessed by movies from kindergarten despite the indifference, bemusement and finally antipathy of my parents.

“I never cared at all for Saturday afternoon serials or the invariably cheap Westerns which accompanied them, and berated my schoolfriends for being taken in by their phony sets, absurd plot-lines, and hammy acting.

“The films which convinced me I wanted to be a movie director were (I’m fairly sure) The Adventures of Don Juan, They Were Expendable, and My Darling Clementine, all shown in Australia between 1946 and 1949.

“I knew nothing of foreign (i.e. non-English language) movies until I was fifteen. A school friend was similarly movie-struck and he took me to Sydney’s one “art house” (The Savoy, now sadly demolished) where I was stunned by the realism of Umberto D.

“Despite involvement in student movies which kept me permanently near-destitute, I struggled through a BA course at Sydney University, majoring in philosophy. I sailed (a six-week journey) for England in 1962, on the day of my graduation.

“Throughout the sixties I worked on a number of short films as either cameraman, editor, or director, or all three. In 1966 I
landed an interesting job with the Production Board of the British Film Institute and remained there until 1971.

“I returned to Australia and directed my first feature film in 1972. . . .”

“All I ever wanted to do was to make films,” Beresford once said. At the time of his graduation, however, the native Australian film industry had been virtually wiped out by American and British competition and even the two principal theatre circuits were in foreign lands. Beresford had gained some experience as a film trainee with the Australian Broadcasting Commission, but it seems to him that “there was very little point in staying on in Australia. It wasn’t like now; there was no atmosphere in which people wanted to make movies. . . . I’d always wanted to travel. I was fed up with living in Australia. Thought: there has to be something more exciting than this.”

Beresford arrived in Britain shortly after Clive James, now well known as a critic and satirical poet. They shared a flat and did whatever jobs they could find. Beresford laid drains, worked in factories, and taught in a girls’ school. He still wanted to make films but could not get a union card and in 1964, in desperation, applied for and got a job as a film editor in East Nigeria, where he made some documentaries of his own. When the Nigerian civil war broke out in 1967, Beresford returned to Australia and secured a post as film officer for the Production Board of the British Film Institute.

At the BFI, Beresford read scripts, worked out budgets, and sometimes served as photographer or editor. In one way or another he had a hand in the production of some seventy films and directed some of them himself, including shorts on Roy Lichtenstein, René Magritte, and the sculpture of Picasso and Barbara Hepworth. In 1971, after some five years with the BFI, Beresford returned to Australia on a visit and found the film community there in a state of high excitement over the establishment of the Australian Film Commission. “They had money available to make films,” Beresford says, “they had the administrative staff but they had no films to make. They hadn’t realized this, but I saw they were going to realize it very soon. . . . I rushed back to London, handed in my resignation, picked up my wife, and we were back in Sydney in a couple of weeks.”

The script that Beresford offered to the Australian Film Commission was The Adventures of Barry McKenzie written by himself and Barry Humphries, who had created the McKenzie character in a comic strip in the British satirical magazine Private Eye. Beresford put it to the Commission that cultural prestige was less important than economic success at this stage of their operation, and won their backing for his first feature. It presents “Bazza” McKenzie (Barry Crocker) as a gross caricature of the Australian male—a beer-swilling, sex-crazed innocent abroad, paying his first visit to Britain with his appallingly genteel Aunt Edna (Barry Humphries in drag). And in the Old Country, Bazza is ripped off, seduced, exploited, harassed, and generally ill-used by hypocritical Pons as broadly caricatured as himself.

As Keith Connolly says, The Adventures of Barry McKenzie “takes a positive delight in juvenile scatology and debauch” and is “so determinedly gauche, so doggedly flagrant” as to invoke “awe and disbelief.” It was received by the Australian critics with a howl of rage and shame but by the Australian public with delight, and it was the first Australian movie for many years to achieve any kind of international distribution. Beresford says, “it got such bad reviews in Australia that, while it made it easier for other people to make films, it made it very hard for me to get work. Everyone said: there’s that lout who makes those low comedies.”

Turning reluctantly to television, Beresford made among other things two feature-length films combining documentary material and the dramatic reconstruction of historical events. The better of them was Poor Fella Me (1973), scripted by Beresford and telling the wretched story of the destruction of the Australian Aboriginals under white rule, from genocide in the nineteenth century to neglect in the twentieth. The Wreck of Batavia (1974), written and produced by Ted Morrisby, is about Jeronimus Corneliusz, a religious fanatic who in 1629 became the murderous dictator of a shipload of castaways on the West Australian coast.

After that. feeling that no doubt he might as well be hanged for a sheep as for a lamb, Beresford resurrected Bazza in Barry McKenzie Holds His Own (1974), which takes the randy Candide and Aunt Edna to Paris and on to a confrontation with Dracula. Connoisseurs maintain that this film is slightly less awful than its predecessor, incorporating as it does some mildly amusing parodies of various movie genres. Beresford’s reputation than slipped to new depths with Side by Side (1975), a “staggeringly cuss” musical made in Britain about two competing London nightclubs, one of them featuring rock music and the other relying on the talents of Terry Thomas and his piano-playing nephew (the ubiquitous Barry Humphries).

Back in Australia in 1976, Beresford was invited to direct the screen version of David Williamson’s successful play Don’s Party. He explains modestly that this chance only came his way after five other directors had turned the script down as impossibly stagebound. But, he says, “I liked it” and “saw that it couldn’t and shouldn’t be ‘opened out.’” It is set on the day of the Australian federal elections in October 1969. Trendy Labor supporter Don Henderson (John Hargreaves), a teacher and would-be novelist, has invited an assortment of friends to his smart suburban house in Melbourne to follow the elections results on television and to celebrate what is expected to be the first Labor victory in twenty-three years.

In fact, it is soon clear that Labor will lose as usual, and at that point the party turns into an increasingly drunken wake—not only for political hopes but for unfulfilled promise, wasted opportunity, blighted marriages. The men are self-deluding failures, their ideals long consumed by the consumer society. As the masks drop, they show a greed for sex and booze to match that of Barry McKenzie himself. The women are more honest with themselves, bitterly aware that they have wasted their potentialities in meaningless marriages to egocentric clowns.

Derek Malcolm called the characters “a group of caricature Aussies who are just real enough to be true,” and the film “a good shot at illustrating the horrors of a particular time and place and of suburban society in general.” Uneven as it is, it represented a great gain in technical command on Beresford’s part and earned him the Australian Film Institute’s award as best director of the year. He says “it was the best thing that happened to me. The film won a lot of awards, got shown all over the place and was a big commercial success in the bargain.”
His battered reputation thus repaired, Beresford made another major advance with *The Getting of Wisdom* (1977), adapted by Eleanor Witcombe from the classic autobiographical novel by Ethel Richardson (who wrote as Henry Handel Richardson). It tells the story of Laura Ramsbotham, daughter of an impoverished country postmistress who scrims and saves to send her to a genteel girl’s school in Melbourne. Laura is frowned upon by her classmates, but she is a Nietzschean “free spirit” who gives as good as she gets, cheats her way to success in a crucial examination, and—in spite of her education rather than because of it—emerges as a person and an artist well-equipped to deal with the world.

Beresford’s direction of this film, it was agreed, was distinguished by a new sureness in his handling of actors. He extracted a fine performance from Susannah Fowle in the lead, and there are excellent characterizations by Barry Humphries as the headmaster, Sheila Helpman as his deputy, and Hilary Ryan as the beautiful girl that Laura falls in love with. “With great skill,” wrote Philip French, “and making good use of the city’s rich heritage of elegant nineteenth-century architecture, the film recreates stuffy Victorian Melbourne. The college staff of stiff-necked clerics and repressed spinsters is sharply etched but never caricatured…the film is realistic without being cynical.”

Unwilling, perhaps, to be categorized as a director of “art” films, Beresford then turned his attention to a radically different subject—a caper movie about the attempt to steal $20 million from payrolls handled by a Melbourne security company. Based on a novel by Devon Minchin, former head of a security organization, and scripted by Beresford himself after much research, *The Money Movers* (1978) has a cast made up mainly of popular Australian television actors. For Keith Connelly, this “densely constructed, intricately plotted and coldly detached” movie was ruined by a “thunderously incongruous” ending—a frenetically edited, sub-Peckinpah welter of gouting blood and torn flesh, a final shoot-out [that] not only punctures the steadily fomented tensions, it transports the film to the wilder shores of barbarity.”

Though it was received with some interest by the critics, *The Money Movers* was, rather surprisingly, a commercial failure. Beresford had great difficulty in finding backers for his next project, *Breaker Morant* (1979), eventually produced by the South Australia Film Corporation with assistance from the Australian Film Commission. Written by Beresford, Jonathan Hardy, and David Sevens, and again incorporating a great deal of original research, it was suggested by Kenneth Ross’s play about a turn-of-the-century *cause célèbre* that was once described as Britain’s Dreyfus Case.

Harry “Breaker” Morant was an English-born Australian soldier, a roisterer, a ladies’ man, a balladeer, and an unsurpassed breaker of horses. Having distinguished himself for reckless courage in the early stages of the Boer War, he was given a commission in the Bush Veldt Carbineers, an irregular unit formed to combat the Boer commandos. In 1901, he and two other Australian officers were arrested and charged with the murder of Boer prisoners and a German missionary. A court-martial found them guilty and, in spite of a mercy recommendation, Morant and one of his comrades were executed on the instructions of Lord Kitchener. George Witton, the officer who escaped the firing squad, subsequently wrote an account of these incidents called *Scapegoats of Empire*.

The film takes very much the view put forward in Witton’s book—that the three were guilty of murder, but that they were acting in accordance with unofficial instructions from headquarters. When it seemed likely that Germany would use the killings as a pretext for entering the war on the Boer side, these young colonels were promptly sacrificed in a rigged trial as “scapegoats of empire.” Beyond that, the film suggests that the three men were fighting a new kind of war, in which the old rules no longer applied. There are obvious parallels with the massacre at My Lai in the Vietnam war, and Beresford has said that he wanted to induce the audience to “reconsider the viewpoint of someone like Morant—or Calley—in this situation,” and to combat the official (British) view of the affair with “a point of view that comes from being Australian and growing up there.”

Accordingly, Morant (Edward Woodward) is presented throughout as a man of great ability, charm, and courage, who goes to his death supporting his comrade and shouting instructions to his executioners, while the British are portrayed as villains and hypocrites. The court-martial is shown as disgracefully misconducted, with the outcome a foregone conclusion in spite of the impassioned defense offered by the inexperienced but deeply committed counsel, Major J. F. Thomas (Jack Thompson). Afterwards all the official records are unaccountably mislaid.

Not everyone accepted the film’s version of the facts or its interpretation of them, and some thought it an apologia for atrocities like My Lai, but most allowed that it presented its point of view with great skill and force. The historian Thomas Pakenham, having studied relevant cypher cables, concluded that Kitchener was motivated by nothing more devious than outrage at the lawlessness of his officers, but nevertheless called the film “a masterpiece of high drama and low budget.” David Robinson found it “one of the rare films that improve with a second viewing,” with “the merits of the best Australian cinema—a directness, a large and fearless tonal range which can take in robust comedy alongside high drama and a delicate sentiment.”

*Breaker Morant* was the greatest box-office success in the history of the Australian cinema. It swep the board of the Australian Film Institute awards and Jack Thompson, selected as best actor by the AFI, was best supporting actor at Cannes. Thompson starred again in Beresford’s next picture, an adaptation of David Williamson’s play *The Club*, about the power struggles within a major Australian soccer club. Reversing the policy he had adopted in *Don’s Party*, Beresford attempted “to capture visually practically everything that is merely described in the original play” and, most critics thought, only succeeded in dissipating the dramatic thrust of the piece.

The enormous success of *Breaker Morant* brought Beresford one hundred and thirty Hollywood scripts to consider. In 1982 he was in Cedar Creek, Texas, working on his first American film, *Tender Mercies*, scripted by Horton Foote. Robert Duvall stars as an alcoholic country-and-western singer who in the course of a calamitous career has thrown away everything—his music, his marriage, his self-respect—in a series of drunken binges. He
rebuilds his life, but in a fashion that avoids sensationalism and cliché and poignantly conveys the difficulty of achieving ordinary happiness. Duvall won an Oscar for his performance, but there was radical disagreement among the critics over the merits of Beresford' direction and Horton Foote’s screenplay.

Disparaging reviews of Tender Mercies, which found its claims to psychological insight hollow and its screenplay inarticulate, were echoed in reactions to Gringe Dwellers, made in Beresford’s native Australia. The film, which concerns the efforts of an aboriginal couple to become accepted by white society, was described by several reviewers as worthy social commentary but poor drama.

King David, an unlikely attempt to revive the genre of Biblical films popularized by Cecil B. DeMille, was neither a critical nor a box-office success despite a popular cast that included Richard Gere in the title role. Many critics recognized that Beresford was trying to breathe fresh life into an outmoded form by forsaking spectacle for social and psychological realism. But none praised the result wholeheartedly, finding the script laughable and the film as a whole embarrassing. The film works, wrote Philip French, “at the level of an intelligent comic strip,” and “operates in some middle ground between the opulent vulgarity of DeMille’s Ten Commandments and the severe austerity of Pasolini’s St. Matthew’s Gospel. Crimes of the Heart, adapted from a Pulitzer prize-winning play by Beth Henley, is more characteristic of Beresford’s work in that it concentrates on the emotions of a small number of characters and is virtually confined to a single setting—here, an old house in the American South, where three sisters are reunited after the youngest has casually shot her husband. Beresford and the principal actresses—Diane Keaton, Jessica Lange, and Sissy Spacek—reportedly took large pay cuts in order to ensure that the film was made. There were admiring comments on the performances, particularly in the giddy ensemble scenes, and Spacek was nominated for an Oscar. The script, however, despite its charm, seemed to most reviewers slight, a vehicle for three star turns and some fine supporting work.

Beresford’s career rather belies his debut as the creator of raucous, echt-Australian comedies. He now sees at much at home on the international scene as in his native country, and his strongest suit may well be intense small-scale drama; he has a gift for drawing extraordinary performances from his actors. The director is a tall, handsome man, still “swarthily cherubic,” who is “never flustered, never raised his voice, but...knows exactly what he wants.”

From Bruce Beresford Instincts of the Heart, Peter Coleman, Angus & Robertson, NY, 1992.

‘What better proof can there be of the distinctiveness of Australian filmmaking than Tender Mercies, a film by Bruce Beresford that manages to be thoroughly Australian though it features Texas settings and an American cast?’ Janet Maslin, New York Times, 4 March 1983

Bruce Beresford’s Australian films had shown men in various stages of degradation—in politics, crime, sport, and war. His first American film, Tender Mercies, breaks out of this circle of defeat in a story of redemption through family life. It is the first celebration of home and hearth in American movies for 30 years—and one directed with an understatement that brings tears without sentimentality.

It is a much a parable as a story. Mac Sledge, an exhausted, alcoholic country and western singer, collapses in a room in a small motel (called the Mariposa) in the Texas Bible Belt. Rosa Lee, the owner-manager, a Vietnam war widow and mother of Sonny, agrees to let him work off his debt provided he does not drink on the job. They marry. He is baptized. He begins writing songs again, although he refuses to sing in public. (‘I’ve lost it.’) He quarrels with Dixie Scott, his former wife, also a singer, who will not let him see Sue Anne, their daughter. Sue Anne elopes and is killed in a car crash, which the drunken husband, the driver, survives.

‘I don’t know the answer to nothing,’ says Mac Sledge, ‘I don’t trust happiness. I never did, I never will.’ The film ends with Rosa Lee watching through a screen door as Mac Sledge and Sonny play football.

Horton Foote began writing Tender Mercies in 1979. He was ‘obsessed’ he said, with MacSledge and all the inarticulate men like him who want to be good but whose lives become an alcoholic shambles. He read the screenplay to his friend Robert Duvall, who had already played in two of Foote’s screenplays: in To Kill a Mockingbird (1963) where he played the non-speaking part of Boo Radley, the loon whose father chains him to the bed during the day; and in Tomorrow (1972) based on a William Faulkner story, where he was cast as a lonely, taciturn Mississippi dirt farmer.

Duvall admired this underestimated writer, and especially his spare, charged style, his melodramatic silences and his non-Shakespearean eloquence. ...

Duvall was looking for off-beat directors, not necessarily ‘biggies.’ He admired some English directors like Michael Apted who did Coal Miner’s Daughter in 1980 and Ken Loach who did Kes in 1969. He also admired the American Robert Young who directed Alambrista, and the Australian Bruce Beresford who directed Breaker Morant….He read Tender Mercies and responded to Foote’s personal style. ‘Most American films about American rural life,’ he said, ‘especially small towns in the South, show a brutal, murderous America that never rang true to me, Here was a fascinating story about people who went to church on Sunday and didn’t go around killing each other. I wanted to do it.’ But he also thought it was too long and was clumsily constructed.

He told Philip Hobel that he would have to discuss it in detail with Foote before making a commitment. (He had no objection at this stage to Robert Duvall, respecting him as a great actor but knowing little of his contempt for most directors.) He spent several weeks with Foote, driving round Texas and working on the script.

He warmed to Texas and its isolated small towns. Often fed by dirt roads, which reminded him of Burra, Coolah and other small Australian towns of his childhood. He also clicked with Horton Foote. ‘He is vastly talented,’ Beresford said, ‘although the talent does not include construction. I kept saying, “Horton, you’ve said it once. Don’t say it again.”...’

Casting the war widow, Rosa Lee, was a difficult but crucial decision. Beresford auditioned scores of actresses in Los
Angeles but none had the right mixture of simplicity, strength and likeability. …Tess Harper walked in. ‘She had a kind of innocence. I said “Read this”…and of course it was perfect…It was a battle because casting a complete unknown in a key role was a risk. A name would have been safer. But I fought and fought and got her the role.’ …

Beresford brought in the Australian cinematographer Russell Boyd (Gallipoli, The Year of Living Dangerously), the editor William Anderson (Don’s Party, The Getting of Wisdom), and the composer George Dreyfus. Waxahachie, Texas was selected as the location.

Meanwhile Robert Duvall was wandering around Texas, absorbing accents and gaits and observing clothes. At one stage he took a job as a singer in a backblocks boozer. Soon he was rolling along like a bow-legged cowboy with a Texas twang. ‘He is a supernormal mimic,’ said Beresford. ‘He will start as a mimic, like Meryl Streep, and then he goes beyond mimicry, which she never does. He’s uncanny.’

Shooting began in early November 1981 and the inevitable conflict between Beresford and Duvall began almost immediately. ‘I decide what I am going to do with a character,’ said Duvall, who totally distrusted Beresford’s pre-planning and storyboarding and exclusion of improvisation. (When Duvall had recently directed Angelo, My Love about gypsy life in Manhattan, his method had been to film a scene, and then figure out what to do next. ‘It’s an experiment,’ he would say.) The director and the star disagreed about pacing, close-ups, improvisation. (Duvall especially liked an improvised scene in which he shows Sonny how to play the guitar.) But the crunch came over the volume of Duvall’s speaking, which was often so soft the actors would miss their cues and even the sound recordist could not pick it up. Beresford would say: ‘Cut! Bob, you missed a line.’ Duvall would reply ‘No. I said it.’

‘I didn’t hear it. No one heard it. You’ve got to be louder.’

‘If I’m louder I’ll ruin the performance.’

‘Bob, there is no performance because we’re not recording it. We’re seeing your lips move. But we can’t hear anything!’

After one major confrontation, Beresford walked off the location: ‘This is hopeless. I can’t get this film done properly. Get someone else who will go along with your lunatic notions.’

They also quarreled, but less bitterly, over the country and western songs which express many of the film’s tragic themes. People who wrote country and western songs sent in tapes by the hundreds. They came from all over, often not from country and western areas. (‘Half these songs are written by Wasps in Northern Canada or Jews in New York,’ Beresford remarked.) Someone had to listen to them and decide if any would serve among the ten songs of the film, including the two or three essential ones.

Beresford explained:

Duvall was the expert, so I gave the tapes to him to shortlist them. But he never listened to any of them. None. The weeks went by and I said ‘Bob, what’s happening?’ He said ‘Oh, I’m getting around to it.

Then I realized he was never going to.

So I got hold of the tapes, played them all and picked every single song in the film. The one that Betty Buckley sings Over You, was nominated for an Academy Award. It’s a really great song.

I also picked the ones that Bob Duvall himself wrote. One night I heard him strumming the guitar and I said ‘What’s that?’ ‘Oh it’s one I wrote years ago. I’m not really much of a song writer but I wrote this and one other.’ ‘Well, play me the other one too.’ He played them both and I said ‘Let’s put them in the film?’ He said ‘Oh no, they’re not good enough.’ I said ‘Well no, they’re not very good. But you sing them well. You put them across well, because you believe in them.

So we did them both.

Despite the tension, Duvall’s performance as Mac Sledge was exact and he won an Oscar as Best Actor. Beresford also coaxed memorable performances out of the other actors. Of many unforgettable scenes probably the one most commented on is the brief and awkward meeting after many years of Mac Sledge and his daughter. As she is leaving she asks him if he remembers a song he used to sing to her when she was little…something about a snow-white dove. ‘I don’t remember that, I don’t,’ says Mac Sledge but a note in his voice, the glimmer in his eyes, and a tension in his body tell us that his emotions are too strong for him to admit that he does remember. After his daughter has left, he looks through a window and finally sings, tonelessly, ‘The Wings of a Dove’ which begins ‘When Jesus went down to the waters that day’. Most of the critics were enthusiastic. Andrew Sarris called it ‘a wonderful movie in every way’; Sheila Benson said ‘it has the feel of an American classic’; and John Simon welcomed a ‘splendid triumph.’ In New York the Directors Guild of America nominated it one of the best five films of 1983 along with Ingmar Bergman’s Fanny and Alexander, James L. Brooks’ Terms of Endearment, Laurence Kasdan’s The Big Chill and Philip Kaufman’s The Right Stuff.

‘I can’t turn around and produce films like Fassbinder.’ —Bruce Beresford

_Tender Mercies_ in 1983 was the turning-point. It was released in New York in March—a month when distributors often unload films they think will not attract the big Christmas or mid-summer crowds. _Tender Mercies_ turned out to be the sleeper of 1983, an immediate critical success which months later was nominated for five Academy Awards and won two Oscars. Bruce Beresford’s _Breaker Morant_ had brought him to international attention. _Tender Mercies_, his first American film, demonstrated that here was both a new voice and a fresh if puzzling talent.

Vincent Canby noted the significance of the film in the _New York Times_. In style and technique, it was both a reaction and a rediscovery: a reaction against the 1970s film and a rediscovery of traditional film fiction before it had been debased by the formulas of hacks.
The 1970s film derived from Jean-Luc Godard and Werner Werner Fassbinder and culminated in American directors like Francis Ford Coppola or Martin Scorsese. You do not identify with the people on the screen (you cannot call them ‘characters’); you scrutinize them, make choices, and contribute to understanding the film since neither the director nor the actors know exactly what they mean. The idea is to disorient us and force us to ‘examine our relations with the universe’, all options are open. Canby called these films ‘cool’.

In the new film, such as Tender Mercies, Canby wrote, the director knows exactly what he wants to see on the screen and has a secure sense of his ability to put it there. He uses traditional or ‘conventional’, means but he seeks the special within the ordinary. Some films of this style can be smug—The Night of the Shooting Stars by Paolo and Vittorio Taviani, for example, or even Richard Attenborough’s Gandhi. But Tender Mercies is ‘provocative’ and has a lively awareness of ‘the bottomless pit that awaits those how lose their bearings in life.’ Not being sure how to label them and wanting to avoid the word ‘sentimental’, Canby lamely called these films ‘warm’.

But the difference between the films of the 1970s and the new films of the 1980s went beyond the techniques of the director. There was a change in moral vision. The 1970s film set out to assault, ridicule or expose optimistic Americanism and all its bland pieties. Now suddenly, Canby wrote, here was a film about people who sang Jesus Saves and are not meant to be funny. Even to summarise the story—down-and-out drunk redeemed by Christ and a good woman—is to revive painful memories of the banalities of Hollywood formula movies.

Tender Mercies worked, partly because of Horton Foote’s screenplay and Robert Duvall’s acting and Russell Boyd’s cinematography, but mainly because of Beresford’s confident direction. Andrew Sarris was only one of many when in Village Voice he said that the film made him mourn for what we have lost. Both Christian reviewers and their critics shared this interpretation of the film. Christian Century called it ‘a movie to cherish, praise, and see again’. Christianity Today said that ‘in its profound respect for religious faith and honest doubt, this film honors God.’ For much the same reason Robin Wood said the film was so bad, ‘so safe, reassuring and reactionary’ that it deserved to win an Oscar.

Both had misunderstood Tender Mercies, but Wood more than the Christians. Beresford had not become a “Christian filmmaker”—although in Tender Mercies as in Black Robe he respects the religious commitment. ‘You can’t research this story,’ he said of Black Robe in a statement which gives the measure of his essentially secularist approach, ‘without coming out admiring the Jesuits…even if you went into it as the greatest anti-cleric of all time. They make Schwarzenegger look like a sissy.’ He would have spoken of the Southern Baptists with similar respect.

But he has also lampooned church figures, such as Kev the Rev McKenzie (at a theological conference on ‘Christ and the Orgasm’ in Barry McKenzie Holds His Own) or the heartless Rev Strachey in The Getting of Wisdom, although these are clearly ridiculous and inadequate figures by any standards. Breaker Morant, on the other hand, is ‘a pagan’ who rejects the last rites (while asking that the epitaph on his grave be the words of Jesus: ‘And a man’s foes shall be they of his own household.’)

All of Beresford’s twenty or more films have made some kind of moral point (‘They all have touches of Stanley Kramer about them,’ he said, ‘and I don’t like Kramer’s films’)—including, most of all, his early and disavowed The Devil to Pay which tells of a Nietzschean master criminal’s pact with the Devil, and his decline, fall, and punishment; or the Dadaist It Dropped As The Gentle Rain, in which a God who is not mocked defecates on a sinful world. But the ten Australian ones operate more by satirising the fraudulent than by demonstrating the good. The two Barry McKenzie films ridicule such traditional figures as Australian nationalists, cheating taxi-drivers and thieving porters and such New Age trendies as double-dealing folk singers, fake artists and phoney TV producers. Barry Humphries who created the characters and acted several of them is a principal progenitor of the films, but Beresford was more than a collaborator; I was his idea to make the films, against Humphries’ judgment, and his determination which overcame the many obstacles.

The Beresford vision in these films is basically anarchist, satirizing impartially the radical liberationists and the conservative snobs. Don’s Party pillories the liberated radicals of the 1960s in a grim intimation of the years to come, and The Getting of Wisdom lampoons the mindless conservatives of a day gone by but lingering on. The Club exposes the manipulative administrators of today and Breaker Morant the manipulative imperialists of yesterday—and every day. The most nihilistic of all is Breaker Morant: here the lower ranks provide the evidence which the higher ranks need for their execution and a colonial government does nothing to save those whom the imperial power has condemned to death. The film honors the doomed men but their laconic stoicism is as futile as a cry in the desert.

In these Australian films Beresford’s ‘moral vision’ is a minimalist one of contempt for lies. ‘I can only make a film if I believe in the story.’ As he put it later, when persuading the producers to make Glory (which he then dropped, over a casting disagreement): ‘You must do what you believe in, and ignore what the polls or market research tell you to do.’

When he was considering Breaker Morant, he had to make a decision about Morant’s guilt. There were two popular views: One
was that he was an innocent scapegoat—a position which Beresford rejected entirely. The other was that he was a homicidal madman. This interpretation troubled Beresford. ‘I told myself that if this were true, I would not make the film.’ It was only after his research satisfied him that Morant was an ordinary, rough soldier who went beserk in the killing fields of Northern Transvaal, that he was able to go on with the film.

By the end of the 1970s, the contempt for fraudulence which had sustained the early comedies, the men’s films and the feminist films was worked out. Breaker Morant’s stoicism or Trilby’s promise could not be repeated indefinitely. Beresford had to take a new turn, and he took it in Texas.

*Tender Mercies* is a transition, both an American and an Australian story in the way none of his later films is. Mac Sledge, the drunk, could easily have had a role in some of Beresford’s earlier films. He could have turned up at one of Do’s parties or strummed his guitar at the Club. His finding Christ is no surprise at all but for Beresford it is his first exploration of religious feeling.

*King David* is a further variation of this new concern. Its theme is the conflict between the love of man and the love of God: Saul’s compassion for God’s enemies leads to God’s withdrawal from his life, and to his living and dying a tormented, forsaken man.

David’s obedience to God, on the other hand, destroys both his will and his humanity. As he dies he urgently whispers to his son Solomon: ‘Be guided by the instincts of your heart, no matter what the Prophets tell you.’

*Crimes of the Heart* also deals, in more secular terms, with the punishment of man’s crimes against the heart. Its redeeming principle is not religion but the family—as celebrated in the sisters’ final party and Lennie’s birthday vision of the sisters laughing happily about ‘just nothing’.

This is by no means Beresford’s last word. When he was in Australia to make *The Fringe Dwellers*, a new theme had emerged—the collision of races and cultures. *The Fringe Dwellers* is the last of his Australian feminist films but it is also the precursor of his American masterpieces: *Driving Miss Daisy*, both a critique and a celebration of liberalism; *Mister Johnson*, a more despairing critique of colonialism; and *Black Robe*, the most pessimistic of all Beresford’s films, culminating in the submission of Indians without belief to a ministry of a priest without conviction, followed by the extinction of the tribe and the disappearance of the mission.

All three films culminate in confessional climactic scenes which cross the barriers of race and culture: Miss Daisy declaring her friendship with Hoke; Rudbeck honouring his deep obligations to Mister Johnson; and Blackrobe acknowledging his love for the unredeemed Indians.

Having exhausted this theme (at least for the time being), Beresford has turned back to the earlier feminist films, finding in Josephine Humphrey’s *Rich in Love*, a means to re-examine their assumptions. (His next film, *Bessie*, a biographical drama scripted by Horton Foote and produced by Richard and Lili Zanuck, about the great blues singer Bessie Smith, will develop both the feminist and race themes.

He remains a restless film-maker, moving from continent to continent, subject to subject, and genre to genre (so far including a thriller, a rock musical, a biblical, a sort of western, and a sci-fi which aborted). But in a more important way he does not change. As Andrew Sarris noted, he is less an Australian or an American film-maker than a European—in his ‘richly redemptive moments’ he belongs with Carle Dreyer or Robert Bresson, and in his ‘deeply committed moral vision’ he joins Jean Renoir or Roberto Rossellini who ‘never minded being taken for simpletons or idiots’.

Andrei Tarkovsky said of Robert Bresson that he is ‘afraid of nothing’. Bruce Beresford is also a film-maker who is afraid of nothing.

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**Preliminary Spring 2011 Schedule, BFS XXI:**

Jan 18 Fritz Lang, *Metropolis*, 1927
Jan 25 Lloyd Bacon, *42nd Street* 1933
Feb 1 Ernst Lubitsch, *Ninotchka* 1939
Feb 8 Luchino Visconti *Ossessione* 1942
Feb 15 Robert Bresson, *Journal d’un curé de campagne* 1950
Feb 22 Martin Ritt, *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* 1965
Mar 1 Nicholas Roeg, *Walkabout* 1971

Mar 8 Clint Eastwood, *The Outlaw Josey Wales* 1976
Mar 29 Bernard Tavernier, *Coup du torchon* 1981
Apr 5 Werner Herzog, * Fitzcarraldo* 1982
Apr 12 Stephen Frears *The Grifters* 1991
Apr 26 Ridley Scott, *Blade Runner* 1982

**Only Five More in the Fall 2010 Buffalo Film Seminars XXI:***

November 9 Wim Wenders  *Wings of Desire* 1987
November 16 Charles Crichton *A Fish Called Wanda* 1988
November 23 Joel & Ethan Coen *The Big Lebowski* 1998
November 30 Chan-wook Park *Oldboy* 2003
December 7 Deepa Mehta  *Water* 2005

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