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ONCE MY MOTHER

By Chris Wallace

THIS Friday night at the Canberra International Film Festival a remarkable documentary will be screened: Sophia Turkiewicz's *Once My Mother*. Turkiewicz is a significant figure in the Australian film renaissance. Fred Schepisi directed films like *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (1978), Margaret Fink produced films like *My Brilliant Career* (1979), Bruce Beresford directed films like *Breaker Morant* (1980), Peter Weir directed films like *Gallipoli* (1981) and Turkiewicz made *Silver City* (1984), starring Gosia Dobrowolska and Ivar Kants, about post-war Polish refugee life in Australia. Turkiewicz wrote the underlying story and directed the film. She co-wrote the screenplay with Tom Kenneally, who was fresh from his Booker Prize win with *Schindler's Ark*. John Seale was the cinematographer. It was the extra dimension of the Australian story that had to be seen on the big screen alongside those of the rest of the original inhabitants and successive waves of arrivals that make up this great continent of ours.

In a way, we're all blow ins. Archaeological records suggest Indigenous Australians migrated here around 50,000 years ago. Then came the Anglo-Celt colonisers two and a quarter centuries ago with, during the gold rushes, a significant sprinkling of Chinese too; non-English-speaking Europeans followed from nearly seventy years ago; the Indo-Chinese and Lebanese nearly forty years ago; a second Chinese migration from nearly thirty years ago; and these days migrants come from the sub-continent, Afghanistan, the Middle East and Africa – along with the usual Anglo-Celts, especially the Irish who face high unemployment post-global financial crisis at home. The migrant story is the Australian story. Without films like Turkiewicz's *Silver City* and television series like the Ben Lewin-directed *Dunera Boys* (1985) there'd be big gaps in the way we see and understand ourselves as Australians.

Once My Mother is of another order again in terms of beauty, difficulty and importance as Peter Weir and Bruce Beresford's raves about it underline. The film is two stories: that of Turkiewicz's Polish mother Helen's life, and that of her own, how those lives joined and parted and rejoined, how love and rejection and ordeals from the epic and historic to the purely personal and psychological made these two remarkable women the people they are. Every migrant – every human being – has a story, but Helen's inspires awe.

There are reasons completely unrelated to the migrant experience to see this film. After years of truly epic hardship, it's the revelation that the father of Sophia, born in a Zambian refugee camp, has duded her and married another on his return to Italy that finally undoes her. Forget being orphaned, living on the streets, suffering (literally) from illiteracy, Russian invasion, exile in Stalin's Siberia, starvation, near death from diphtheria and long, frozen marches all over the Soviet Union, before ending up in a Zambian refugee camp and then a remote Western Australian hamlet with a young child of her own, speaking no English. Helen survived all that only to be done in by a letter from her lover's wife that he was taken. Why is it women can stand up to everything the Stalins of the world throw at them only to falter at a lover's failure?

Once My Mother also underlines Poland's appalling fate being charged across and carved up regularly between Germany and Russia, and the crushing consequences of the peace deal cut between Britain, the United States and the Soviet Union at World War II's end. Turkiewicz hasn't got it exactly right when she says the history books are blank on Poland's fate. How Stalin suckered an old, extremely sick and flattery-prone Roosevelt against Winston Churchill's skepticism about Stalin and his European intentions is now well documented, but perhaps not widely enough known. Turkiewicz does well to remind us of it.

Most of all, *Once My Mother* is also the story of a mother and daughter. Helen reaches the ends of the earth – Adelaide, which she comes to love deeply – only to lose her child after placing her in an orphanage. Sophia holds a lifelong grudge against her mother for putting her there, not understanding that as a single mother Helen couldn't get work while she was with her, and unable to get her out of the orphanage once she'd put her there. Helen gets a job, finds a man and marries him to get her daughter back. If only Sophia had not been deaf to her mother's stories, blinded by the usual – and in a developmental sense probably necessary – prejudices against her mother's message, how much better both their lives might have been. Still, at the end, there was love. Don't miss it.

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