



From Russia with love: Nicole Kidman

is Sophia, speaks fluent English. He's determined to hand Nadia over to the police but takes pity on her when he guesses she's pregnant. They travel incognito to London (Alexei has left her an airplane ticket). They track down the two men and, after a fight, take the money and all three airplane tickets. Nadia asks John to come to Russia with her. He agrees.

Birthday Girl is a comedy about a man who tries to introduce the exotic into his humdrum English life. On paper, director Jez Butterworth appears similarly determined to shake up his own world. Butterworth's film debut *Mojo* had an all-British cast. Here star Nicole Kidman is, of course, Australian; her fellow cast members Vincent Cassel and Mathieu Kassovitz are French; executive producer Sydney Pollack is American; male lead Ben Chaplin is an English actor best known for his work in the US. Hero John (like Butterworth) comes from St Albans but ends the film on a plane to Russia. Butterworth's question for himself and us would seem to be: where does escapism end and pioneering begin?

There are some beautifully nuanced scenes (written by Butterworth with his brother Tom) to help us decide – almost all of them concerned with language. The twist in this tale is that Russian mail-order bride Nadia (who swindles her 'husband' before moving on to another one) has been able to speak English all along – she pretends she doesn't know anything but Russian with prospective husbands like John, because, as she says of the scam she pulls on them, "It goes quicker that way." Her victims presumably think they're celebrating difference. Instead, they're protecting themselves from it – mute, she becomes whatever they want her to be. John falls for this like everyone else but, as we discover from a note he leaves Nadia, he dreams of talking to her. What finally impresses her, though, is a lie he tells about an ex-girlfriend (he says she's dead; in fact, as he admits a second later, she's still alive). Forced to discover from

scratch what words can offer, he also begins to understand what they can hide.

Where the film falls down is in trying to suggest that everyone in suburbia needs help. Such recent television programmes as *I'm Alan Partridge* and *Marion and Geoff* have complicated the idea of the prattish little-Englander beyond recognition. We laugh at the figures in these shows, but we also identify with them. In this film the townspeople of St Albans, not to mention John himself, owe more to the obvious caricatures seen in *Mr Bean* or *The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole*. And the dreadful 'jolly' music on the soundtrack doesn't help. The jokes at these characters' expense flatter our own sense of sophistication (the sequences involving the bank's gushy therapist are particularly cheap). Butterworth makes the landscape around St Albans look magical and brooding, providing a view of the commuter belt we rarely see. There are no such insights into its inhabitants.

The portrayal of Nadia's hot-tempered Russian boyfriend Alexei is similarly crude. His fluttery cohort Yuri is allowed some lovely shading (his wide eyes make his cruelty come as a shock each time). By contrast, Alexei quickly degenerates into a stock villain.

The suggestion is that he can't cope with Nadia's bondage games with John – she's never done that before, so he knows it must be love. But are we really expected to believe that none of her other 'husbands' have had sexual kinks? And that it's only through John that she comes alive to the pleasures of being tied up? It's fine to have Nadia learning something from John, but it seems wishful thinking that the revelation would be in the area of sex. John's predilections are made to look quirky and liberating, and we can't help but compare his and Nadia's restrained struggles with Alexei's taste for real coercion.

This tactic backfires, however. The very fact that the odds are stacked so obviously in John's favour means you wind up begrudging him his happy ending. The final scenes – from the slapstick fight in the hotel room to the zany airport proposal – could have been written for Hugh Grant or Colin Firth or Joseph Fiennes. They give off that oh-so-sterile Miramax perfume; all you want to do is hold your nose.

At its best, this film is as ambitious and sweetly sharp as Preston Sturges' *The Lady Eve* (1941). Chaplin and Kidman have a fizzy chemistry. And if it's Kidman's pinched paleness that generally proves more gripping, it's only because, as in all the blackest screwball comedies, experience trounces innocence every time. But at its worst, *Birthday Girl* is a smug mess.

If Butterworth does end up working away from home – he's shown he can direct as well as write for a big star, so Hollywood probably will offer him something – let's hope he manages it without buying into any more British stereotypes. Such escapism is good for business, but severely limits Butterworth's progress as a pioneer.

Charlotte O'Sullivan

Dancing at the Blue Iguana

USA/United Kingdom 2000

Director

Michael Radford

Producers

Michael Radford
Sheila Kelley
Damian Jones
Graham Broadbent
Ettchie Stroh
Ram Bergman
Dana Lustig

Screenplay

Michael Radford
David Linter
Based on an improvisational workshop containing the contributions of Charlotte Ayanna, Kristin Bauer, W. Earl Brown, Daryl Hannah, Chris Hogan, Sheila Kelley, Elias Koteas, Vladimir Mashkov, Sandra Oh, Rodney Rowland, Jennifer Tilly, Robert Wisdom

Director of Photography

Ericson Core

Editor

Roberto Peripignani
Production Designer
Martina Buckley

Music

Tal Bergman
Renato Neto

©Impro-duction Ltd Production Companies

Moonstone
Entertainment present a
Bergman Lustig/Dragon/
Gallery production

Executive Producers

Samuel Hadida
Leslie Jean Porter
Willi Baer

Line Producer

Dave Pomier

Production Executive for

Dragon Pictures

Coach

Elaine Chin

Production Co-ordinator

Heidi Pavey

Unit Production Manager

Dave Pomier

Location Manager

Jeremy Alter

Post-production

Consulting by EPC:

Joe Fineman

Supervisor:

Michael M. Toji

Assistant Directors

Chad Rosen

Carolyn Sara Fine

Melissa Cummins

Lorenz

Christina Collins

Charles E. Dowell II

Character Development

Coach

Dominique Sire

Script Supervisor

Jan McWilliams

Casting

Hill/Howard-Field

Camera Operators

Darin Moran

Peter Pilafian

Michael J. Walker

Additional Editing

Alain Jakubowicz

Art Director

Trevor Murray

Set Decorator

Chris Tunney

Costume Designer

Louise Frogley

Costume Supervisor

Ernesto Martinez

Make-up Department

Head

Suzanne Rodier

Key Make-up

Richard Rodier

Body Make-up

Farah Bunch

Tattoo Artist

Rita Pertile Hengst

Hair Department Head

Ketty

Key Hairstylist

Solina Tabrizi

Titles/Opticals

Title House

Musicians

Guitar:

Kat Dyson

Sax:

Gary Mick

Keyboards:

Renato Neto

Drums/Programming:

Tal Bergman

Music Supervisor

Alex Patsavas

Additional Music

Supervision

David Franco

Soundtrack

"Amazing Grace", "Sex

A.M." – Charlotte

Ayanna; "Arms of

Stranger" – Ali Handal;

"She Pulls the Chain" –

Three Time Loser; "Wish

(Komm zu Mir)" from

Run, Lola, Run – Franka

Potente, Thomas Dürr;

"Come Back" – Devin

Powers; "The N.S." –

Sloan; "Les Misery" –

Anoushka Fisz, Dave

Stewart; "Angel" –

Marianne Faithfull, Dave

Stewart; "The Lamb" –

Artemis; "So Cold" –

Tenderloin;

*"Submission" – The

Newlydeads; "Gimme

One More Shot" – Scott

Nickeley, Jamie Dunlop;

"World Keeps Spinning"

– Courtesy of Porkpie; "I

Saw the Sun" – Mother

Superior; "Hours before

Light" – Bocephus King;

"Dance Me to the End of

Love" – Leonard Cohen;

"Recognition" – The Step

Kings; "Come Upstairs" –

Queen Sylvia Embry;

"Pussycat Moan" – Katie

Webster; "Where I Come

From" – Tom Anderson;

"Looking for Answers" –

Susan Tedeschi; "Battle

Flag (Lo Fidelity Allstars

Re-mix)" – Pigeonhed;

"Porcelain" – Moby; "Lips

Like Sugar" – Echo & the

Bunnymen; "Sparklestar"

– Bubble; "River of Tears"

– Eric Clapton;

"Unbound" – Robbie

Robertson

Dance Consultant

Tanya (Castle) Neilsen

Executive Sound

Administrator

Daniel R. Chavez

Production Mixer

Coleman Metts

Digital Layback Recorder

Gary Blufar

Re-recording Mixers

Neil Brody

Dan Leahy

Supervising Sound Editor

Richard E. Yawn

Sound Editors

James L. Pearson

Bruce Barris

Anthony R. Milch

Donald L. Warner Jr

Bernard Weiser

Kim Secrist

Lance Laurienzo

Sound Effects

Co-ordinator

John Michael Fanaris

ADR

Mixer:

Thomas J. O'Connell

Supervising Editor:

Becky Sullivan

Foley

Artists:

Casey Crabtree

James Bailey

Mixer:

Jeffery Heyveld

Supervising Editor:

Victor Iorillo

Stunt Co-ordinator

David M. Barrett

Cast

Charlotte Ayanna

Jessie

Daryl Hannah

'Angel', Becky Willow

Sheila Kelley

'Stormy', Marie Hughes

Elias Koteas

Sully, Stormy's brother

Vladimir Mashkov

Sacha

Sandra Oh

'Jasmine', Cathy

Jennifer Tilly

'Jo', Ellen Taylor

Robert Wisdom

Eddie Hazel

W. Earl Brown

Bobby

Chris Hogan

Dennis

Rod Rowland

Charlie

Kristin Bauer

Nico

David Amos

Dave

Carolynne Aycaguer

Sophie Delvaux, poetess

R.C. Bates

Jimmy

Jessie Bradford

Jorge

Christina Cabot

Christina

Bill Chott

Angel's regular

Maurice Compte

drug buyer

Jack Conley

Officer Pete Foster

Marta Cunningham

Yolanda

Peter Gardner

Jerry, S&M client

Ruthanna Hopper

Desiree

Stephen Hornyak

trucker

Kevin Hunt

dj

Peggy Jo Jacobs

Sarah, adoption official

Joel Hurt Jones

customer

Jason Kravits

Gordon

Michael Loprete

Stormy's regular

Ellyn Maybe

Fiona, poetess

Tanya Neilsen

Castle

Buckley Norris

talking man

Isabelle Pasco

female customer

Shannon Ransom

bartender

Vincent Ricotta

customer

Harper Roisman

Harry Goldberg

Ted Rooney

assistant

Lobo Sebastian



Pole position: Daryl Hannah

◀ identity of her generous suitor and Nico performs, returning afterwards to the dressing room for a late-night heart-to-heart with Jasmine. Early next morning we learn that the hitman has assassinated his target. Eddie and Bobby walk off together.

Dancing at the Blue Iguana began life as a four-month improvisational actors' workshop which eventually congealed into a screenplay by director Michael Radford (*Il postino*) and co-writer David Lintner. It's understandable to want to root for any Hollywood insider willing to depart from the screenplay-based studio approach, but the confused results here – an ensemble of cardboard-thin characters and a soap-opera-like plot with innumerable unresolved storylines – will not encourage many to follow Radford down this path. To its credit and no doubt thanks to the freedom allowed the players, *Dancing at the Blue Iguana* (which covers a week in the lives of five strippers) boasts a fair number of unusually well-acted scenes – many involving Jennifer Tilly as the explosive Jo – often with an unpredictable intensity. Best among these is a claustrophobic dominatrix scene in which PVC-clad Jo and her submissive client are interrupted by the arrival of drunk and battered Jessie, a fellow stripper at the club. The schizophrenic atmosphere, with Jo ricocheting from comforting friend to enraged disciplinarian often within the space of a single sentence ("Don't touch him! You don't know where he's been!"), makes for exciting viewing.

Though the acting itself has some highs (and lows, namely Daryl Hannah's character Angel, who is implausibly dim), the workshop background finally results in a

feeling of amateurishness. Too many scenes boil down to two players screaming at one another: the club's owner Eddie infuriated with tardy employee Jasmine, whom we'd seen earlier in a catfight with Jo, who is tossed bodily out of the club by Eddie's enraged business partner Bobby not long before a violent encounter with a fellow pregnant woman at a clinic, and so on and so on.

That the strippers should be such lamentably predictable stereotypes doesn't help: the lonely drug addict, the chain-smoking drunk, the self-destructive minor, the brooding victim of incest, the seemingly lobotomised woman-baby. The most ludicrous character is Jasmine, the closet poet (Shock horror! A stripper who reads books!) who expands the setting from cliché-ridden strip club to cliché-ridden poets' coffee house, complete with wide-eyed French girls and kind, sensitive men. Unfortunately in some workshop session the actor playing her soulful love interest must have blurted out "I want to kiss the poet in you!" and it stayed in the script.

The quiet scenes also tend to have the two-player-sparring format (Eddie reminiscing about lost love with Bobby; Jasmine and Nico winding down after their evening's work), and share the flaws of much 1960s-70s Cassavetes-style experimental film-making: overlong takes and indulgent editing. The sheer number of pregnant pauses and deep, self-probing insights crammed into a single conversation can only be described as unnatural. It's awful to have to admit it (given Radford and co's admirable intentions), but what's missing here is a decent script, one with a workable plot (did we really need the Russian hitman?) and filled-in characters for these talented actors to play.

Gilda Williams

Dogtown and Z-Boys

USA 2001

Director

Stacy Peralta

Producer

Agi Orsi

Screenplay

Stacy Peralta

Craig Stecyk

Director of Photography

Peter Frampton

Funk 49

the James Gang;

"Ezy Ryder", "Foxy

Lady", "Freedom", "Bold

as Love" – Jimi Hendrix;

"Sidewalk Surfing" – Jan

& Dean; "Achilles Last

Stand", "Hots On for

Nowhere" – Led

Zeppelin; "Six

Underground" – Sneaker

Pimps; "Surfrider" – The

Lively Ones; "Cat Scratch

Fever", "Motor City

Madhouse", "Wang Dang

Sweet Pootang" – Ted

Nugent; "Volaré" –

Emilio Pericoli; "Us and

Them" – Pink Floyd; "Bad

Boys" – The Pretenders;

"Maggie May" – Rod

Stewart; "I Wanna Be

Your Dog" – The Stooges;

"Gimme Danger" – Iggy

& The Stooges; "Children

of the Revolution" – T

Rex; "Bad Reputation" –

Thin Lizzy; "Disco

Inferno" – The Trammies;

"Hannah" – Robin

Trower; "Rocky

Mountain Way" – Joe

Walsh; "Old Man" – Neil

Young; "La Grange" – ZZ

Top

Sound Recordists

Alan Barker

Cyrus Faryar

Digital Audio Transfer

John Fennell

Re-recording Mixers

Joe Milner

David McRell

Re-recording Engineer

Paul Hackner

Supervising Sound Editors

Eddie Kim

Dane A. Davis

Skateboard Consultants

Ozzie Ausband

Ray Flores

Narrator

Sean Penn

50s Voice Announcer

Joe Leahy

With

Zephyr Skateboard Team

Jay Adams

Tony Alva

Bob Biniak

Paul Constantineau

Shogu Kubo

Jim Muir

Peggy Oki

Stacy Peralta

Nathan Pratt

Wentzle Rumi

Alan Sarlo

Jeff Ament

Skip Engblom

Glen E. Friedman

Tony Hawk

Jeff Ho

Henry Rollins

Craig Stecyk

Certificate

15

Distributor

Columbia TriStar Films

(UK)

8,162 feet

90 minutes 42 seconds

Dolby Digital

In Colour

[L3:1]

This documentary, mixing archive footage and present-day interviews, tells how a group of young surfers from Venice Beach, the 13-member Zephyr team, revolutionised skateboarding in California in the mid 1970s by bringing to the sport an aggressive, surfing-inspired style. The group hone their skills – performing never-before-seen mid-air manoeuvres – while skating in dried-out swimming pools during a summer of drought. After achieving a measure of success at the 1975 Del Mar Skateboard Internationals and being the subject of a string of articles by writer-photographer Craig Stecyk for *Skateboarder* magazine, some of the team members become famous.

Whatever happened to the coolest kids in high school? In this documentary about skateboarding in the mid 1970s – a film that positively drips with cool – you get to see the kids who were unbearably hip 25 years ago as they are today, grown men in their forties. Some run successful businesses, one is in prison, one "was last seen in Mexico". Another, Stacy Peralta, directed this film, which, among other things, shows us just how cool he was back then. The Dogtown of the title, we learn, was a seaside slum in Los Angeles, site of a derelict amusement park "where the debris meets the sea." And the Z-Boys were an assortment of amateur surfers from broken homes, including Peralta, who turned Dogtown's Zephyr Surf Shop into their clubhouse-cum-surrogate family, and who inadvertently revolutionised the faded sport of skateboarding during the long afternoons they idled away on the storefront pavement.

Dogtown gained attention at the 2001 Sundance film festival, where it shared the audience award. Peralta's crowd-winning skill lies in his ability to position the audience on the same side as the superstar Zs. You cheer when faster, smoother urethane wheels replace the locking clay wheels that had previously been on skateboards; you immediately recognise – just as the Z-Boys did – the riding potential of smooth, sloped, empty Beverly Hills swimming pools. In the hilarious footage of the tough, long-haired Zephyrs turning up at the 1975 Del Mar Skateboard Internationals – a watershed tournament that saw one of the first public displays of the Z-Boys' high-flying surfing-inspired skateboarding – the team's superiority over the contest's old-school piroouetting 'champions' is staggeringly convincing. And in charting the history of the Z-Boys, the script is all carves and skims and grinds; Peralta assumes we're conversant with the in-crowd's slang and never embarrasses us by suggesting we might need a glossary.

The movie features rapid-fire cuts and sequences filmed in grainy, scratchy black and white, such rough-and-ready devices a strained attempt to convey some of the appealing rawness of the Z-Boys' skateboarding style. The