



Mundane comfort in golden hopes of a stuttering Pom



A FUNNY thing happened on the way to the Oscars. Or at least it looks likely when nominations are announced next week.

A little movie about a poncy Pommy bloke with a bad stutter and his unlikely friendship with an Aussie speech therapist looks like it might end up with a look-in for best actor and best picture gongs. It has already earned a Golden Globe for lead actor Colin Firth.

But look at that entirely accurate synopsis of *The King's Speech*. If that was all you knew, would you really want to shell out \$18 to see that movie on a Saturday night? Yet a heap of people do — the \$15 million movie has raked in more than \$80 million worldwide and is still going strong.

It's part of a trend over the past few years of the most unlikely films getting both bums on seats as well as critical acclaim. It's a rare quinella.

Remember 2008's *Gran Torino*? It was about a grumpy old war vet who doesn't like

Asians, then gets to know an Asian family and, surprise, decides he does like them after all. Yet this Clint Eastwood directed film, in which he also starred, was critically hailed, earned itself a Golden Globe nomination (and a heap of other awards internationally) and became Eastwood's most commercially successful film ever with a \$270 million haul from a \$33 million budget.

Of all the amazing things Eastwood has done as an actor or director over a 50-year career — the *Dirty Harry* films, *Unforgiven* and everything else — this is the one that won the biggest audience response.

And how about a flick about a middle-class teenager who gets pregnant to a friend then decides to keep the baby and adopt it out? Hmm. Try to get one of your mates to come along and check out a movie based on that blurb.

Of course that film was 2007's *Juno*, a \$7.5 million flick that took in \$231 million worldwide. It also picked up three Oscar nominations, three Golden Globe nominations and took home an Oscar plus a heap

of international awards.

Can you imagine the expression on the faces of studio bosses during the producers' pitch for money for all of these? Studio execs are in a pretty cutthroat industry, particularly in recent years and understandably unwilling to take risks as internet piracy hurts returns while a renaissance in TV production, such as *The Sopranos*, *Mad Men* and so on, is pushing people into DVD binges. And so we end up with one comic-book adaptation and nostalgic TV re-make (come on, seriously, *The A-Team*?) after another. It's the way it has always been.

So it is nigh on impossible to imagine the likes of these three films being made in the blockbuster-driven '80s and '90s. Not without serious re-writes and at least one slow-motion walk away from a massive explosion, anyway.

So why is it they have such a resonance with audiences now?

It's a familiarity thing. These are prosaic films dealing with the everyday — mundane in the



truest sense of the word, relating to the world and earthly affairs. We do not know the people or even their situations (not many of us have faced the prospect of becoming King in wartime, but who doesn't dread a wedding speech or presentation to bosses at work?). But we can recognise the challenges they face.

But unlike so much local production (or the likes of acclaimed but oh-so-dreary Brit bores Mike Leigh and Ken Loach), they're not grim social realist films focused on a substance-abusing welfare underclass (in recent years, think Aussie flicks *Beautiful Kate*, *Candy*, *Caterpillar Wish*, *Ten Empty*, etc).

They're stories infused with optimism, hope and spirit. Once

the credits have finished rolling, these films also have a resonance in the audience's everyday lives. In the wake of *The King's Speech*, more people are apparently presenting themselves or their youngsters to therapists, although Speech Pathology Australia says this is purely anecdotal with no numbers crunched as yet.

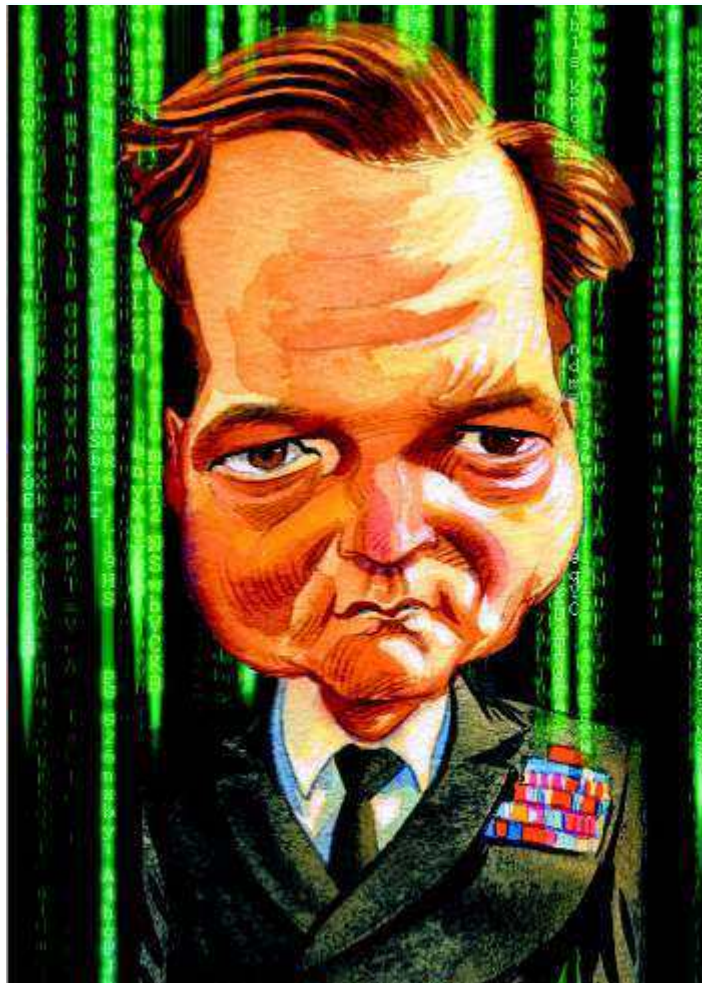
And *Gran Torino* reflects ongoing tension in city suburbs across the Western world following waves of migration from developing countries via refugee and other re-settlement programs over the past 30-odd years. Sure, not all interactions are as dramatic as that depicted in Eastwood's film, but as we know all too well here in Sydney, tensions are very real.

Perhaps the standout here is

Juno. It garnered praise from pro-lifers and pro-choice folk alike and led to a healthy public discussion that went beyond the polarising rhetoric of the abortion debate to canvass adoption as an alternative.

And the adoption rate has gone up in NSW, although the Department of Community Services attributes that to various institutional and structural changes. But it's hard to discount the *Juno* effect.

We've come a long way since proto-film critic and ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle surmised that the dramatic hero should be of noble stock and occupy a high status social position. But that's a damn good thing.



Prosaic films dealing with the everyday – mundane in the true sense