

# Movie Review: The Great Maiden's Blush

GRAEME TUCKETT

Last updated 07:49, May 6 2016

**The Great Maiden's Blush (M, 108 mins) Directed by Andrea Bosshard & Shane Loader ★★★★★½**

*The Great Maiden's Blush* is the third feature film from Wellington duo Andrea Bosshard and Shane Loader. Their first, *Taking The Wae Wae Express*, was a wee gem, full of unexpected moments as it tracked a young man's path to reconciliation after a car crash. The second, *Hook, Line and Sinker*, put us in the middle of a family working their way through a health crisis. They were both modest and likeable films.



Miriama McDowell and Renee Lyons star in *The Great Maiden's Blush*.

In retrospect, they were also a training ground for Bosshard and Loader as they worked towards *The Great Maiden's Blush*. Because this film, small in scale though it may still be, is the work of a couple of mature filmmakers just dripping with intelligence, flair and vision.

*The Great Maiden's Blush* is a tale of two women. They come from different sides of the tracks, but sharing a ward after the births of their children, they forge an alliance.

And from there, two very different stories unfold. Somehow *The Great Maiden's Blush* takes in illegal street racing, rose breeding (from which the film gets its name), love, sex and death. For a film that takes place over a couple of days and only involves a handful of disparate people, it sure has got some universal and weighty themes on its mind, as well as a few plot machinations that could have been lifted from one of the operas Bosshard and Loader also found the time to include.

But, it works. This is a sinuous, clever, ambitious, nuanced, layered and gorgeously assembled film.

Pay *The Great Maiden's Blush* the attention it deserves and you'll be rewarded with one of the most beautifully photographed, best sounding and best written films you'll see all year. Bravo.

- Stuff

BE WOWED BY SOMETHING RARE AND BEAUTIFUL

*The Great Maiden's Blush*

Review by Mandy Hager (*Kapiti Observer*)

I was recently asked to watch a preview of the New Zealand film *The Great Maiden's Blush*, which is written and directed by Wellingtonians Andrea Bosshard & Shane Loader, and stars Miriama McDowell and Renee Lyons. It premieres on the 2nd May at Embassy Theatre Wellington, with the film opening in select cinemas across NZ from the 5th of May.

*The Great Maiden's Blush* tells the story of two first-time single mothers, one a girl racer, the other a pianist and gardener, who share a room in a post-natal ward after the birth of their babies. A precarious friendship develops between the two, and as they face the challenges of new motherhood, they must also confront their pasts and face the truth of the paternity of their newborn babies. Like the beautiful rose that gives the film its name, *The Great Maiden's Blush* blooms into a rich yet delicate tale of new motherhood, babies and absent fathers, opera and drag racing, gardening and Schubert. (from the blurb)

If I had to sum up this film in one word it would be 'beautiful'. From the opening shots it is clear that fine film makers are at work. The cinematography is a joy in itself, captured by the expert eyes of Alun Bollinger and Waka Attewell, two of the country's top directors of photography. Every shot is considered and perfectly framed, revealing intimate moments and studies of nature beautifully rendered. If you go for this reason alone, you will not be disappointed.

But equally impressive are the nuanced, complex performances from all the actors, creating authentic characters who subtly challenge stereotypes and present the audience with an unusual line-up not often seen on screen. For those of us frustrated by the lack of meaty roles for female actors and the dearth of distinctly female stories, this film is a salve. Will it impress the people who go to the movies for action-packed Hollywood dramas? No. It is a slow burner of a story, a gentle revealing of the difficulties and complications in these very believable life stories and an ode to the bonds of motherhood and female friendship.

The scripting is subtle and leaves much to the actors to convey; the moments of stillness, where the camera watches in close-up as emotions unfold, are deeply moving and powerful. As someone who hates the over-explaining common in Hollywood scripts, I was captivated by the careful layering of story (helped in no small part by excellent editing), giving away nothing until the time is right. The twists surprise, turning audience expectations inside out more than once.

The soundtrack, too, plays an integral part in the beauty of this film. I'm a sucker for opera at the best of times and to find it so naturally woven into this story alongside boy-racer burn-outs was a masterful touch. The charming piece of Schubert reprised throughout brought an added personal pleasure for me, having listened to my mother playing it on the piano when I was young.

The details were carefully addressed too: newborn babies that truly looked newborn, mothers still sporting post-baby bellies, that unwanted outpouring of milk at the sound of a baby's cry

. . . everything felt and looked authentic, making the whole all the more believable and hypnotic.

I suspect it won't be a film for everyone; we have been so over-burdened with male-led action plots, where the female characters are merely love interests or eye-candy, that some may find it too slow and the story too small. But for me, I loved this in-depth look at the pain and turmoil that surrounded these two births and I felt as though, in bringing these two women's stories to life, it speaks of all women and the sacrifices made when new life is brought forth. So if you want to be wowed by something rare and beautiful, go see it!

## The mother load

Two single women about to give birth forge a deep bond.

### THE GREAT MAIDEN'S BLUSH

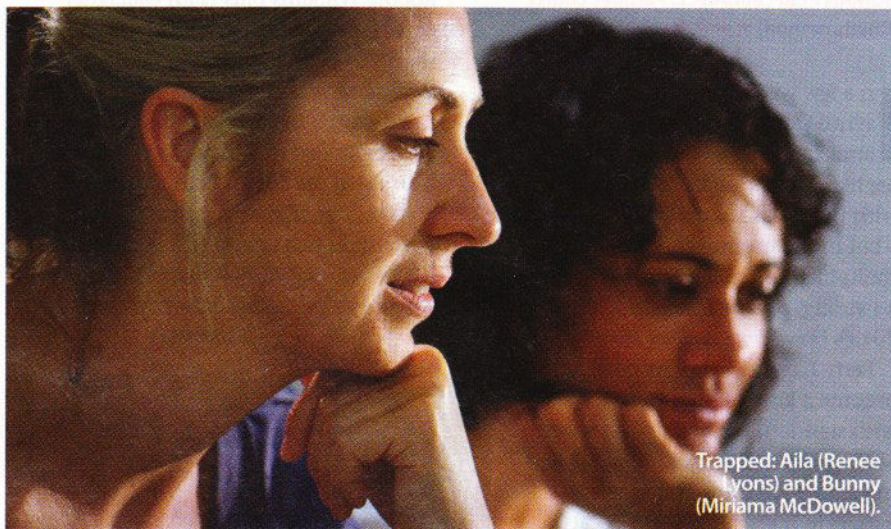
directed by Andrea Bosshard & Shane Loader

**H**ow long have you been in for?" Aila asks a young father as they stand over an incubator, a just-born child fidgeting inside.

"Two months," he replies, as if they were cellmates. Indeed, the intensive care unit in *The Great Maiden's Blush* seems more like a prison than a hospital wing, familial bonds trapping new mothers in more ways than one.

Aila (Renee Lyons) and Bunny (Miriam McDowell) begin this story – directed by Wellington film-makers Andrea Bosshard and Shane Loader – as guarded ward-mates, eventually forming a deep, almost intangible bond through the impossible circumstances that forced them together.

There is an intensely impressionistic sense to Bosshard and Loader's work: things become blurred, like a half-forgotten dream, as we go back to uncover the



Trapped: Aila (Renee Lyons) and Bunny (Miriam McDowell).

source of these character's aches – ethereal images played against the cold white gowns and linoleum of the ward.

Lyons and McDowell pour a wellspring of melancholy and world-weariness into their performances, unblemished by any need for gloss or artifice. There are screams of labour and flinching moments at the breast pump. They are tangible and truthful characters.

The film (whose allusive title is given meaning by the closing scenes) was made on a sliver-thin budget. But the directors make the most of the limitations, proving that care and dedication are worth far more than any blank cheque. ★★★★★

**IN CINEMAS MAY 5**



## The Great Maiden's Blush

(M)

108 Mins

★★★★

Reviewed by Madelaine Empson (*Regional News Connecting Wellington*)

*The Great Maiden's Blush* is a drama about single mothers Aila (Renee Lyons) and Bunny (Miriam McDowell). Both having just given birth, the women strike up a precarious friendship whilst recovering in the antenatal ward of Wellington Hospital. Aila and Bunny hail from very different walks of life; the former is a gardener and pianist, whilst the latter is a drag-racer. Both women have a crippling secret.

Just as the narrative of *The Great Maiden's Blush* weaves together the past and present, cinematographers Alun Bollinger and Waka Attewell entwine stunning shots of natural cycles, barren landscapes, drag-racing, and operatic performances. Although it may sound jarring, the juxtaposition of this cinematic imagery is in fact ingeniously symmetrical to the contrasting themes within the film – of love and heartache, motherhood and loss, and truth and deceit.

Lyons and McDowell are both gifted performers whose chemistry is as captivating as the film's slow plot reveal.

Supporting actors Carl Drake and George Fenn, (who play Aila's lover and his nephew respectively), lend vulnerability and depth to Lyons' character whilst delivering striking performances themselves. Barnie Duncan and K.C. Kelly, (who play Bunny's love interest and his father respectively), deftly explore the dynamics of the father-son relationship. Kelly's performance in particular is astounding and gut-wrenching.

Prison guards Ian Lesa (another of Bunny's love interests), and Gavin Rutherford add yet another layer to the intricate film; Lesa plays infatuation in a swoon-inducing manner, whilst Rutherford's 'bad cop' routine suggests more than meets the eye.

Written and directed by Andrea Bosshard and Shane Loader, *The Great Maiden's Blush* is masterfully crafted and beautifully-rendered.

---

*The Great Maiden's Blush* will be playing at Penthouse Cinema from May

# Movie Review: The Great Maiden's Blush

SARAH WATT

Last updated 05:00, May 1 2016 (Sunday Star)



Miriama McDowell stars as Bunni, a young woman with a tragic past.

## REVIEW:

The Great Maiden's Blush adds to this year's strong line-up of Kiwi films.

### **The Great Maiden's Blush (M)**

**108 mins ★★★½**

We're scarcely five months in and already 2016 is proving a great year for New Zealand film, having proffered a boisterous Samoan comedy, an animated war documentary, a socially-minded drama and a straight-faced comedy about some wilderpeople.

Adding to the anthology of gritty stories told poetically (one of the above-mentioned wilderpeople long ago coined Kiwi film as "the cinema of unease"), *The Great Maiden's Blush* tells the intimate tale of two women from very different walks of life whose paths cross in the ante-natal ward of a hospital.

In typical odd-couple form, their trajectory towards friendship starts with wariness and assumptions as each tries to figure the other out: Bunni, the girl-racer with a tragic past (a deeply committed performance by *The Dark Horse's* Miriama McDowell) and Aila (a strong leading role debut by Renee Lyons), the classical musician who harbours a shameful secret.

The writing-directing team of Andrea Bosshard and Shane Loader (both at the helm of 2011's *Hook, Line and Sinker*) keep their characters, and the audience, engaged through a delicately-paced plot of slow reveals and mysterious flashbacks – occasionally too opaque for this viewer, although leaving questions in the audience's minds certainly provokes post-match discussion.

At the heart of this thoughtful "woman's picture", however, is the unambiguous and affecting ache of bearing a child into less-than-ideal circumstances. While Maiden's dialogue often follows the path most-anticipated, Bunni and Aila's backstories provide endless surprises and strange twists.

Notably, *Blush's* aesthetic leaves no film technique unused, resulting in an often beautiful melange of layered shots and artfully-relayed messages amidst diverse camera shots. In keeping with the non-linear narrative, the film often feels like an art installation of myriad heartfelt ideas.

Enhanced throughout by a stunning classical soundtrack, one scene in particular, where fish-out-of-water Bunni learns to breathe opera, is particularly lovely.

As each woman's denouement is revealed, the story loses some of the gritty authenticity which was so promising early on, but *The Great Maiden's Blush* is nonetheless a beautifully-crafted and resonant parable on motherhood and the unbreakable bonds it fosters.

**- Stuff**