

Tank Girl

Directed by Rachel Talalay; Starring Lori Petty, Malcolm McDowell.

Tank Girl is a spunk. She is the ultimate fantasy chick: sexy, aggressive, cynically sadistic, and, ultimately, in control of a large piece of machinery. Any fantasy elements not included in Tank Girl are present in Jet girl, so that no-one feels left out. The whole idea of Tank Girl would be a lot more subversive if the entire thing wasn't the creation of two men. As it is, in comic form, it is still a long way from the mainstream.

So I was very excited when I heard that Tank Girl had made it to the screen. I thought it meant that it was finally possible to create films based around an alternative premise, show them in commercial cinemas, and retain credibility.

How naive I was. I should have expected what I got: a mainstream movie. In fact, *Tank Girl* was so clichéd, and so often failed to reflect any of the original Tank Girl-ness, that when the film actually reverted to cartoon-like interludes, they possessed more intensity, humour and subversion than any of the live action bits.

Tank Girl is actually a shocking reflection of how the commercial film industry can kill independent and original thought. For example, in the comic, Tank Girl is a vigilante, vaguely on the side of good, who gets into scrapes, and uses her witty arrogance and, one would believe, subliminal feminine charm, to always come

through in the end. Most comic-book characters are made more interesting by the stuff we don't know about them. Just why, for instance, does Judge Dredd continue to see validity in upholding the law when all of his best mates have long ago been blown to bits, and it's patently obvious to everyone that all those in positions of power are corrupt. We are more interested because we can fill in the dark, blank bits ourselves, turning Dredd or Tank Girl into agents of our own fantasies.

However, in the film, Tank Girl becomes the agent of revenge. For this revenge to seem relevant, and credible to the film's audience, she is given a history, à la Mad Max. But whereas Max goes mad, Tank Girl gets neither more directed, thoughtful or clever. The action serves only to provide her with more gags, while all the real work is done by Jet and the Rippers. In fact, as the film progresses, Tank herself simply becomes more vapid and irrelevant. I think this is in direct contrast to the point of the original Tank Girl idea. In the comic strip, the action was meant to define the character, because the assumption is that you don't need to know the whole Tank Girl history to get into the action, and to have to make the entire life of Tank Girl relevant in each story

is impossible. Therein lies the difference between a film and comic strip; one is ongoing, while one stands alone, with its 90 minute interpretation, for eternity.

This leads me to my second point of contention with this film, and, unfortunately, many of its ilk. A lot of films made from comic strips are essentially wasted opportunities. The chance exists for the film makers to bring to the screen some of the elements that have made the comic so interesting. Tank Girl is not really a main stream comic. Yet *Tank Girl* is a main stream film. It has a conventional narrative and structure as it follows Tank Girl through her adventures. The film looks normal: apart from the all too short animated bits, the direction is too conventional.

Tank Girl the comic may simply be the grunge response to Snow White, but if so the film is even less. It possesses absolutely none of the attitude of the comic, and for me this is a tremendous crime. There are good films about determined women, stories of women on the wrong side of the law, or fighting against the odds. There are also good films based on comic strips, that do justice to both mediums. The only hope for Tank Girl was for the commercial cinema. It has done neither, and now we must await the next one to be released, Judge Dredd, to see if they can get it right.

GARY POWER

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Media Law in Australia

by Mark Armstrong, David Lindsay and Ray Watterson; Oxford University Press, 1995; 3rd edn; 307 pp; \$32.95 softcover.

'The media is a map searching for a territory' said J.G. Ballard author of *Empire of the Sun* and *Why I Want to Fuck Ronald Reagan*. Anyone watching, or involved in, the media's frantic struggle to fill the spaces between advertisements must recognise the truth of his diagnosis. Long gone are the days when BBC news announcers, dressed in tails, would play classical music if they thought there was nothing worth reporting.

Now, in our 'information society', the media in all its proliferations has become an elemental force. It drives public opinion and make those nominally in power tremble before its om-

nipotence. The law, always aiming to tame the untameable and reduce the irreducible, lags behind, panting like a three legged dog.

Even three legged dogs can bite, however, and those who work in, or deal with the media need legal guidance. In Australia they can turn to two books, *The Law of Journalism* (Sally Walker, Law Book Company, 1989) or the book under review, *Media Law in Australia*.

Media Law in Australia is broad in scope, including chapters on the legal context of media law, advertising, promotions and competitions, and ownership of the media along with central topics such as defamation, contempt

and copyright. The various regulatory bodies such as the press council and the film censorship board are also discussed. *Media Law in Australia* is written in a clear and conversational style, without compromising its quality. A person with an interest in media could gain a comprehensive overview by reading the book from cover to cover rather than just turning to it as a reference for a particular problem.

Cases and legislation are, as far as possible, left out of the main text. However *Media Law in Australia* is fully referenced, with extensive endnotes. This leaves the text uncluttered, but forces the reader into gymnastics if they wish to keep track of dates, etc.

The Law of Journalism in Australia is written more as a textbook, with a detailed analysis of the relevant legal

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Death and the Maiden

**Directed by Roman Polanski;
Screenplay by Rafael Yglesias
and Ariel Dorfman; Rated R**

Based closely on Ariel Dorfman's hugely successful play of the same name, *Death and the Maiden* is a powerful film about the aftermath of torture. Set in an unspecified South American nation, the narrative focuses solely on three characters and their different ways of coping with horror.

Death and the Maiden explores notions of punishment, loyalty and revenge and asks whether a society can ever be 'normal' again after its government has committed physical and psychological atrocities against the people. Can you punish a regime?

Polanski's direction is superb as are the performances given by the cast of three, particularly Sigourney Weaver as a torture survivor. Despite its disturbing subject matter the film is also visually compelling. The release of *Death and the Maiden* is eerily timely given the recent announcement of a South African reconciliation commission.

Anyone with an interest in human rights and the morality of punishment should see this film.

Directed Verdicts of Acquittal

By the New South Wales Law Reform Commission; Discussion Paper 37; June 1995; 39 pp.

A week before the last NSW election the then Attorney-General, John Hanford, referred the issue of directed verdicts of acquittal to the NSW Law Reform Commission (LRC). Given the hysteria about law and order issues that characterised the campaigning by both the Government and the Opposition, a reference of this nature is hardly surprising.

The LRC's task is to determine whether the Crown should have a statutory right of appeal against acquittals directed by the bench in NSW. Such acquittals are rare and generally occur

because at the end of the prosecution case it appears that there is no charge to answer.

The LRC does not support introducing a right of appeal from a directed acquittal because of the difficulties associated with the drafting, interpretation and implementation of a provision that could reconcile Crown powers with traditional legal protection of the accused. The Discussion Paper also raises concerns about the possibility of double jeopardy.

The Discussion Paper is available free of charge from the LRC (tel 02 252 3855). Submissions are invited by 31 August 1995.

steps to control the consumption of alcohol by its members.

The *Alcohol Report* recognises the importance of collective rights in indigenous culture and is a welcome addition to the current debate on the deplorable state of ATSI health services.

The cost of the report includes a plain language community guide and postage (concessions available). For more information or to obtain the Report call Bernice Pemberton at the HREOC: tel 02 284 9600.

***BITS* was compiled by Frith Way. ■**



Alcohol Report: Race Discrimination, Human Rights and the Distribution of Alcohol

by the Race Discrimination Commissioner; HREOC 1995; \$19.95.

The *Alcohol Report* is intended to be a guide on the legality of measures undertaken in Aboriginal communities in central Australia to limit or prohibit the availability of alcohol.

Prohibitions have often met the objection from service providers and the Liquor Commission that they breach the *Racial Discrimination Act*. In the Report, the Race Discrimination Commissioner concludes that such prohibitions are saved from being discriminatory by the special measures provisions in the Act. The Commissioner has decided to issue certificates on application stating that in her opinion the prohibitions do not constitute a breach of the Act.

The Report does not purport to deal with the social problem of alcohol abuse but sets up a framework to empower communities to take practical

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rules. It is more effectively set out with subheadings, indexes and tables of cases and statutes to aid someone who is searching for a particular point of law. However, released six years ago, it is handicapped by its age.

While they are both fine books, *Media Law in Australia* has the distinct advantage of being up to date. It covers important recent developments such as the *Theophanus* case on the constitutional basis of freedom of communication in discussion of government and political matters, and the reorganisation of the electronic media through the *Broadcasting Services Act (1992)* (Cth).

Of course with the media constantly re-inventing itself and the unrelenting onslaught of technical and regulatory innovation, the threat of becoming outdated is a problem affecting *Media Law in Australia*. [warning: obligatory 'information superhighway' reference follows] Maybe they should stick the fourth edition on the Internet.

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