

The World's Fastest Indian

Whatever image comes to mind on reading the title of this film, know that the 'Indian' is an extraordinarily designed motorcycle of the 1920s, emanating from Springfield, Mass. With its body mouldings and low-slung position for the driver it resembles more a coffin on wheels than a conventional bike, and it occupies the mythic sort of ground one equates with such screen antecedents as Herbie the VW beetle, Indiana Jones's whip or, more obscurely, James Caan's sidearm in *El Dorado*: old-fashioned and crude it may appear, but we know in the audience that it's going to wipe the board. It is, I suppose, a character in the film on the same footing as its enthusiastic and loving owner, Burt Munro (Anthony Hopkins).

Set in the early 60s, the film tells of Munro's realization of his long-held ambition to attend Speed Week on the Bonneville salt flats, Death Valley, and see what his bike can really do when it is opened up. Naturally there is no end of obstacles that attend this quixotic mission, and naturally no one (except us) expects him to set a new world record.

Writer/director Roger Donaldson, returning to New Zealand after a patchy career in Hollywood, sets a leisurely pace, clearly relishing a project close to his heart, while Hopkins, a well publicized solo driver and appreciator of wide open spaces, throws himself into the role: he cries, he dances for joy, he gives off that shout of a laugh that he has, he does everything except master the New Zealand accent (which slips at times into Cockney or Welsh). Whether he is melting down old parts to make new pistons for his bike, filing down his toenails with a power tool or overcoming prostate problems by washing down ground dog's bones (an Indian, as in Native American, remedy he tries in desperation), we believe in this chap and his overriding passion, his willingness to live in a garage and burn the skin of his calf to fulfil a dream. Probably we've all met someone like him; secretly we would like to be him.

Of course before he can overcome prostate and heart problems, financial difficulties, a fragile, temperamental, not to mention unsafe, motorcycle, and general ignorance of the North American way of doing things, he must first convince an awful lot of people that he is actually a good egg. And if I had one criticism of the film it would be the finely stacked odds that determine how most of the time the people he meets are sympathetic to his cause, prepared to go the extra yard for him and, in the women's case, take him to their hearts. Some of us like our 'feelgood' messages a little less candy-wrapped than here, but nevertheless the image of Munro hurtling across the floor of Death Valley at approaching 200mph is one that will be with me for a long time, and that's because, like him, we've been made to earn it.

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