

**THE DRESSMAKER****2015****118 minutes**

Directed by Jocelyn Moorhouse

Starring: Kate Winslet, Judy Davis, Liam Hemsworth and Hugo Weaving

In 1926 in the Australian outback town of Dungatar, schoolboy Stewart Pettyman dies in unknown circumstances. The only witness to his death, schoolgirl Myrtle Dunnage, is branded a murderer and exiled from the town by Stewart's father and town councillor, Evan Pettyman. 25 years later in 1951, Myrtle, now an accomplished dressmaker and going by the name Tilly, returns to her hometown to take care of her sick mother, Molly. Upon arrival, she is greeted by local police sergeant Horatio Farrat, who is secretly a crossdresser.

Tilly returns home to find the house squalid and her mother plainly mentally ill, which has earned Tilly's mother the nickname "Mad Molly" throughout town. Unable to remember the events of 1926, Tilly asks her mother about Stewart Pettyman's death, as she believes that day left her cursed. Molly claims to know nothing about the incident.

The entire town is quickly alerted to Tilly's return and after a series of events, her friend Gertrude reveals to her that she had hidden from Stewart Pettyman, who had been bullying her unmercifully. Tilly begins to regain the favour of the townspeople, so Councillor Pettyman recruits dressmaker Una Pleasance to start a rival dressmaking service to steal Tilly's business. This is initially successful, but when Gertrude hires Tilly to create her wedding dress, the rest of the townspeople return to Tilly, ruining Una.

Tilly uses a feather boa to bribe Sergeant Farrat into letting her read her former schoolteacher, Beulah Harridiene's witness statement from the day Stewart Pettyman died. Upon reading it, Tilly discovers that Beulah's statement is false. Tilly begins to believe that she may no longer be cursed.

While out in town, her mother Molly suffers a stroke, and later dies. Only Tilly and Sergeant Farrat attend the funeral. Molly's death sets off a chain of disturbing and macabre events.

Critics' comments:

- The film-maker's adaptation of author Rosalie Ham's much-loved debut novel of the same name, embraces its dark humour and runs with it all the way to the morgue. Moorhouse stitches together a record of one of Australian cinema's well-worn story outfits: the tale of someone returning to the small town community they grew up in and dealing with baggage left behind. In this instance the drama is less about healing old wounds than sending old grievances to kingdom come. (from The Guardian)

- Starring Kate Winslet as a spirited 1950s haute-couturier who decides it's time to return to her miserable hometown and give the place a little colour (mostly red), this insistently quirky comedy-thriller-mystery-horror-revenge saga serves up an ugly human menagerie of ghouls and grotesques — every one of them contributing a different patch to a crazy quilt of murder, adultery, repression and madness. (from variety.com)

- The Dressmaker is not one of those sentimental fables in which a free-spirited stranger brings new life to a repressed community in the vein, say, of the Juliette Binoche vehicle *Chocolat*. Like many outback towns in Australian cinema, Dungatar is something of a hellhole, its very name suggesting a smelly spot where the hapless get stuck. Truth be told, Moorhouse has so many characters and subplots to juggle that her storytelling can feel disjointed. On the other hand, the lurches from broad comedy to grim melodrama and back are evidently intentional, part of a strategy for throwing the viewer off-balance, along with the dramatic colour contrasts and spatial distortions. Either way, it's not for nothing that Tilly's favourite colour, bright red, evokes both fire and blood. All questions of taste and plausibility aside, *The Dressmaker* is a hoot and a healthy shock to the system. Australian cinema may never be quite the same again. (from www.smh.com.au)