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Australia

(BELGIAN-FRENCH-SWISS)

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Paris A UGC release of a Films de la Dreve/AO Prods./CAB Prods./Christian Bourgois Prods./RTBF/Ciné 5 coproduction. Produced by Marie Pascale Osterreith. Directed by Jean-Jacques Andrien. Screenplay, Andrien, Jean Gruault, Jacques Audiard; camera (color), Yorgos Arvanitis; editor, Ludo Troch; supervising editor, Henri Colpi; art direction, Herbert Westbrook; costumes, Yvonne Sassinot de Nesle; music, Nicola Piovani; sound, Henri Morelle, Gérard Lamps; production manager, Jef Van de Water. Reviewed at UGC, Neuilly, Aug. 30, 1989. (In Venice Film Festival, competing.) Running time: 118 MIN.

Edouard Pierson	.....	Jeremy Irons
Jeanne Gauthier	.....	Fanny Ardant
Julien Pierson	.....	Tcheky Karyo
Agnès Decker	.....	Agnès Soral
Madam Pierson	.....	Hélène Surgère
Francois Gauthier	.....	Maxime Laloux
André Gauthier	.....	Patrick Bauchau
Saturday Pierson	.....	Danielle Lyttleton

■ "Australia" is a quietly affecting drama of expatriation and homecoming by Jean-Jacques Andrien, one of Belgium's finest film talents. Film's very subtlety and discretion however may work against its commercial possibilities beyond arthouse and fest circles.

Tripartite in coproduction (Belgium, France, Switzerland) and

bilingual (French-English), it remains a successful example of multinational European filmmaking dictated by subject matter.

Andrien, who grew up in the heart of the Belgian wool industry in Verviers, chose his hometown as one of the main settings of his screenplay, written in collaboration with French scripters Jean Gruault and Jacques Audiard. The other chief location is southern Australia, where we first meet the story's Belgian-born hero, an Aussie wool merchant.

Played with introspective strength by Jeremy Irons, protagonist is a laconic Belgian-born war veteran who decided to remain in Australia — for whom he served as a fighter pilot — to raise a daughter he had from a woman who had died (his many years away from birthplace and language tacitly explain Irons' accent). His reticence about his past creates one of the film's currents of psychological "mystery" since even his daughter, now 12, has been deliberately kept in the dark about her mother's identity and her father's own family back in Belgium.

It is the child's quest for her own roots that Andrien interweaves with Irons' return to Belgium, summoned by his brother and mother to help save their failing wool-carbonizing plant. Irons quickly sums up the industrial situation as hopeless, though his tradition-minded brother (played with fierce commitment by Tchecky Karyo) is too blinded by his artisan's pride to admit that the factory is doomed in the general economic crisis.

But Irons' resolve to return quickly to Australia and his daughter wavers when he meets Fanny Ardant, a young woman of peasant stock who moved into the urban middle-class through a marriage with a lawyer (Patrick Bauchau). As (geographically, spiritually and emotionally) rootless as Irons is, she arouses a dormant passion in him. His invitation to join her on a business trip to England at first shocks her, but she shows up unannounced at his London hotel, then the next day takes fright and runs back to Belgium, resolved not to continue the affair.

Film ends on a note of hope in the future — and reconciliation with the past. Irons, who has succeeded in arranging a business deal that could save the family enterprise, reveals to Ardant the circumstances of his life he has repressed. At the same moment, on the other side of the globe, his daughter (who in a phone conversation has spoken with her Belgian grandmother), discovers the mother she never knew in an old reel of film Irons has kept hidden in his room.

Andrien's direction has an elegiac finesse that is lyrically enhanced by the lensing of Greece's Yorgos Avantis (associated notably with compatriot Theo Angelopoulos). Avantis' magical images of the vast Australian landscapes and

claustrophobic Belgian industrial zones transcend facile geographic contrasts to suggest the spiritual moods of Andrien's characters — their loneliness as well as their possibilities.

A sequence that owes its essential power and ethereal beauty to the lighting is the tense climax when Karyo, in apparent despair over impending bankruptcy, takes a dangerous nocturnal glider plane as the other principals anxiously gather at the air terrain, fearing tragedy.

The cast is faultless. Ardant is especially poignant in her self-revelatory monolog in London (which Irons reciprocates later). Agnès Soral is just right as the extroverted friend who encourages Ardant's leap into the love affair. The classy Hélène Surgère is the grandmother who makes secret phone contact with a grandchild whose existence she never suspected. Young Aussie newcomer Danielle Lyttleton has thoughtful melancholic warmth as Irons' daughter.

Nods as well to Herbert Westbrook's art direction, Yvonne Sassinot de Nesle's costumes and Nicola Piovani's score.—*Len.*