

AUSTRALIAN 'GALLIPOLI'

By Janet Maslin

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A YOUNG athlete takes a dare. A handsome runner in the first bloom of youth, he agrees to race barefoot against a bully on horseback, even though the odds are stacked hopelessly against him - and even though an important contest he has been training for is only days away. He cuts his feet badly while outrunning the horse, but not even the bruises can lessen his bravado. So when the day of the major race arrives, he runs triumphantly. And when he decides, on this same day, to enlist in the army, he does so with the same reckless, buoyant self-confidence that induced him to compete with the horse and to court disaster.

Peter Weir's "Gallipoli," which opens today at the Baronet, follows this young Australian and others like him to the fateful World War I battle of the title. Beginning with the footrace, and ending with the amphibious military maneuver that proved so catastrophic for the British and Australian forces, the film approaches the subject of war so obliquely that it can't properly be termed a war movie. Besides, it is prettier than any war film has ever been, which makes its emotional power something of a surprise. Mr. Weir's work has a delicacy, gentleness, even wispieness that would seem not well suited to the subject. And yet his film has an uncommon beauty, warmth and immediacy, and a touch of the mysterious, too.

Touches of the mysterious are certainly Mr. Weir's stock in trade; in "The Last Wave" and "Picnic at Hanging Rock," the bewildering, magical elements outweigh all else. In the more sweeping "Gallipoli," he relies successfully on a greater naturalism, so that the story of his young soldiers has the easy, uncomplicated momentum of a tale of action.

Yet the more elusive images, though infrequent, are those for which the film is best remembered. The soldiers are first fired upon while they are bathing, and Mr. Weir's underwater shot of these surprised, naked young swimmers in reddening water is one of his loveliest and his most disturbing. So is the image of the night landing at Gallipoli, with boats full of soldiers waiting quietly, utterly in limbo, enveloped in a blue mist.

Much of "Gallipoli" has the ring of a chronicle of boyish exploits, albeit an unusually good-looking and sweet one. Archy (Mark Lee), the handsome blond runner of the opening scene, becomes fast friends with Frank (Mel Gibson), a more ironic, less golden-limbed fellow, who happens also to be a track star. Together, they journey from rural Australia to Perth, traveling across blindingly white desert (another of Mr. Weir's striking images) to reach the post where they plan to enlist. Their path also leads to Cairo, where Mr. Weir stages a long sequence of soldiers' experiencing their last carefree moments at the bazaar, a sequence at once comic and touching. Mr. Weir, whose other films have had their share of mumbojumbo, shows himself here to be well able to work in a forthright and engaging manner.

He is also very successful with his actors. Mr. Lee, with no previous film experience and sunny good looks, makes a very serviceable Archy, and Mr. Gibson shows wit, ingenuity and range as Frank. A number of small roles are well handled, even those that suffer from the sentimentality Mr. Weir imposes on some portions of the story. Bill Hunter, as a major who brings a bottle of champagne off to war (a gift from his wife, for him to drink on their anniversary), is most effective despite the maudlin side to his role. So are David Argue, Robert Grubb and Tim McKenzie, the various young players whose primary job here is to await a terrible end.

Much of "Gallipoli" has a full-blown, almost romantic style more akin to that of "My Brilliant Career" than to "Breaker Morant," another Australian film dealing with that country's military history. There's nothing pointed in Mr. Weir's decorous approach, even when the material would seem to call for toughness. But if the lush mood makes "Gallipoli" a less weighty war film than it might be, it also makes it a more airborne adventure.

"Gallipoli" is rated PG ("Parental Guidance Suggested"). It contains some nudity and strong language. Janet Maslin

Mysterious Touches

GALLIPOLI, directed by Peter Weir; screenplay by David Williamson, from a story by Mr. Weir; director of photography, Russell Boyd; film editor, William Anderson; produced by Robert Stigwood and Patricia Lovell; released by Paramount Pictures. At the Baronet, Third Avenue and 59th Street. Running time: 110 minutes. This film is rated PG.