

Faithful to a fault, but Baz's Gatsby misses the point

With his version of *The Great Gatsby* Baz Luhrmann hasn't betrayed F. Scott Fitzgerald's much-loved book. He's just got the tone all wrong.

By Karl Quinn of the *Sydney Morning Herald*

Whatever sins he has committed with *The Great Gatsby*, Baz Luhrmann is innocent of one charge at least: he has not betrayed the book. He has, rather, been faithful to a fault.

Much of the criticism of the film has been about Baz's alleged failure to honour F. Scott Fitzgerald's text, one of the most revered books in modern American literature and one so popular it reportedly still sells half a million copies per year. But in terms of the characters, essential dialogue, and key moments (and even many incidental ones), Baz is scrupulously faithful to the source. The problem isn't one of fidelity so much as finesse.

I came out of the film slightly dazed, impressed by its vaulting ambition but feeling like I'd been assaulted by a pumped-up raver decked out in dayglo and glitter. It was bold, brash and utterly lacking in subtlety – in so many ways the opposite of Fitzgerald's slender and perfectly wrought story.

Talking to friends afterwards, I railed at the excesses of some of the key scenes – and none more so than the moment when we meet Daisy Buchanan (Carey Mulligan) for the first time. (They thought the scene a highlight, so what do I know?)

Entering the drawing room of the Buchanan mansion, Nick Carraway (Tobey Maguire) is engulfed by floor-to-ceiling diaphanous white drapes as they billow from one side of the room to the other in an unseen, unfelt (yes, there are limits even to 3D), and yet somehow the opposite-of-understated breeze. It was grotesque, over-the-top and, I was sure, an utter travesty of the scene as rendered by Fitzgerald.

So I went home and re-read the book, trying to salvage the memory of its slim economy from all that grandiose excess. And guess what? The scene that had so offended mine eyes that I very nearly plucked them out (well, very nearly ripped the 3D glasses off from my 2D glasses so that I might cover mine eyes in despair) was not so very different to Fitzgerald's vision after all.

"The windows were ajar and gleaming white against the fresh grass outside that seemed to grow a little way into the house. A breeze blew through the room, blew curtains in at one end and out the other like pale flags, twisting them up towards the frosted wedding cake of the ceiling, and then rippled over the wine-coloured rug, making a shadow on it as wind does on the sea."

In retrospect, I suppose it was a blessing that Baz didn't throw in some vivid green astroturf, a plastic bride and groom hanging upside down from the ceiling, and a small boat darting across the Axminster in his quest to out-Fitzgerald Fitzgerald. All in glorious 3D, of course.

The made-for-poster image of Leonardo DiCaprio's Jay Gatsby standing at the end of the dock, holding his hand out across the water as if to stroke Daisy from afar, felt similarly overstated. And yet, there it was in the book: "*He stretched out his arms towards the dark water in a curious way, and, as far as I was from him, I could have sworn he was trembling.*"

The two parties at the Gatsby mansion are practically storyboarded by Fitzgerald, albeit in a skeletal, rather impressionistic style that becomes ever-more fleshy in Baz's hands. Even the terrible car accident that seals the collapse of Gatsby's fantasy of repeating the past (another exchange lifted almost word for word from Fitzgerald) is rooted in the book.

Well, some of it anyway. The graphic wounds are there – "when they had torn open her shirtwaist, still damp with perspiration, they saw that her left breast was swinging loose like a flap" – but the tumbling of the flame-haired woman through the air like some fleshy Catherine wheel is purely Baz's creation. Is it mere coincidence this has been one of the most vilified moments in the film?

Clearly, then, the issue is not that Baz has been *unfaithful* to the book. It is that he has been *inflatable* to it, pumping up every slim moment to the point where it practically explodes off the screen.

Such a slim tome seems hardly capable of bearing the weight of Baz's ambitions.

The book is 145 pages long. The movie runs 142 minutes. It cost (so it is rumoured) between \$130 million and \$150 million to make. That's roughly a million dollars per page per minute. No wonder it buckles a little.

But really the biggest problem with *Gatsby* lies not in scenes or dialogue or even character, most of which Luhrmann gets more or less right. The great failing is one of tone.

Fitzgerald's book is deeply melancholic from beginning to end, a parable about old money versus new money, and how cruelly the odds are stacked in the former's favour. It is the most class-conscious of American stories.

In the end, all Tom Buchanan has to do to see off the threat that is Gatsby is to expose him to Daisy as being Not Like Us.

In the crucial scene where Tom reveals what he knows of Gatsby's sudden wealth, Daisy finally collapses back on the old certainties, however repellent she might so recently have found them.

"Please, Tom! I can't stand this any more."

Her frightened eyes told that whatever intentions, whatever courage she had had, were definitely gone.

This is a crucial scene in both book and film, in which the struggle is not just between two men for a woman's affections, but between two ways of being in the world. Baz gets it right, as perhaps he should. There is, after all, something of the arriviste about his films, which have never hesitated to shimmer and sparkle even when they were made on a diamante budget rather than diamond (his first feature, 1992's *Strictly Ballroom*, cost just \$3 million). And there has always been something of the Tom Buchanan about the attitude of the film-making and reviewing establishment towards him and his work.

Where the film comes horribly unstuck is in its point of view on all this spectacle. If *The Great Gatsby* is a parable, Nick Carraway is the lens through which we see it unfold – but in book and film he is cut of very different glass. He is old money in Fitzgerald's hands, but of the somewhat faded variety, slightly distrustful of a world in which he is both insider (he was at college with Tom) and outsider (he lives in an \$80-a-month shack set between Long Island mansions). He recognises, with a deep ambivalence, the venality and shallowness that lie just beneath the surface of all that breeding.

He sees, too, the effort involved in Gatsby's fantastic act of self-creation – *"The truth was that Jay Gatsby of West Egg, Long Island, sprang from his Platonic conception of himself"* – and while he doesn't entirely approve of it or trust it, he can't help admire the thrusting spirit that makes it possible. America was built on just such acts of reinvention.

"They're a rotten crowd," Nick tells Gatsby when everything has fallen apart. *"You're worth the whole damn bunch put together."*

"I've always been glad I said that. It was the only compliment I ever gave him, because I disapproved of him from beginning to end."

In the film, Tobey Maguire's Nick pays Gatsby the same compliment. But nowhere in the scene is there a hint of the caveat that follows. This Nick has never disapproved of Gatsby. From beginning to end, he has gawped in wide-eyed, besotted wonder.

Had he – and, more to the point, had Baz – been able to pull his gaze away for just a moment, to be just a little less dazzled by all that razzle – to be a little less at *"the service of a vast, vulgar, and meretricious beauty"* – things might have been different.

Then, perhaps, all that faithfulness to the book might have produced something more than an empty echo.