

Screen, Screen Reviews

Sundance 2019 – The Nightingale – Review

Online Screen Editor Jacob Heayes is enthralled by Jennifer Kent's uncompromising revenge film.

5 mins read

Written by & [Jacob Heayes](#) | Jun 20, 2019

Jennifer Kent immediately established herself as a filmmaker to watch with *The Babadook*, her startling horror debut that delved into motherhood as much as it did haunted pop-up books. With her second film *The Nightingale*, Kent has once again pronounced herself as a slick voice in genre filmmaking, sharply deviating into the territories of revenge thriller and historical drama without compromise. An objectively bleak yet humanist depiction of 19th-century colonial Australia, *The Nightingale* is tailor-made to divide audiences. For those who fall into its grasp however, it proves quite the enthralling and emotional experience.

Aisling Franciosi will likely be the name on everyone's lips after leaving this film, embodying the lead role of Clare with enough intensity and agony to incite tears and terror into any audience. Few performances demand so much of their actors, yet Franciosi is horribly convincing throughout, forcibly rollicking the narrative forward with powerful aggression. Injected into the British military commune established in Tasmania (then Van Diemen's Land), Clare is little more than an acoustic appetizer for the soldiers, singing and dancing to ensure survival of herself, her husband and their infant. Kent makes no concessions in communicating the brutality of Van Diemen's Land – still in all regards a penal colony – with the flippantly abusive attitudes of the soldiers strikingly doubling for the remorselessness of their surroundings. Sam Claflin's Lieutenant Hawkins becomes the manifestation of militant self-righteousness, manipulating Clare for his own satisfaction and

subsequently committing atrocities that spur on her hellish descent into the unforgiving Australian wilderness.

“The dynamic between Clare and Billy gradually transposes with revenge as the thematic focal point of the film, remarkably building a beautiful narrative of human kindness and companionship from the roots of a story of extreme violence”

For the majority of *The Nightingale*, the narrative plays comfortably within revenge tropes, moving forward as a slow-paced chase film between Clare and Hawkins both vying for some form of vengeance. With the introduction of Baykali Ganambarr’s Billy, the film swiftly operates on another layer in addition to the cutthroat revenge film at its core. An Aborigine tracker, Billy is a fascinating character to watch given Ganambarr’s own lack of acting experience and familiarity with Aboriginal culture. The dynamic between Clare and Billy gradually transposes with revenge as the thematic focal point of the film, remarkably building a beautiful narrative of human kindness and companionship from the roots of a story of extreme violence. At times, *The Nightingale* reflects a somewhat gnarlier version of Nicolas Roeg’s 1971 film *Walkabout*, quietly developing ideas of cross-cultural connection solely through the base similarity of being human. The tonal distinctions between the first and final acts couldn’t be sharper all thanks to engaging chemistry between Franciosi and Ganambarr.