

# Cultural exchange

By [Steve A. Vineberg](#) in the [March 9, 2004](#) issue

Though only the second feature by the Australian director Sue Brooks (and the first to open in this country), *Japanese Story* is an almost perfectly calibrated small work, like a finely shaped short story. About the serendipity of crossing paths with a stranger, it's a sort of companion piece to *Lost in Translation*, but with an entirely different tone.

Hiro (Gotaro Tsunashima) is a Kyoto businessman with a young family who travels to Australia to check out a software deal with a small geological firm. Sandy (Toni Collette), the firm's co-owner, reluctantly accepts the assignment of playing tour guide, showing him the facilities and then, to satisfy his curiosity about the source of the rocks in their lab, driving him out to the desert. At first she treats the responsibility of ferrying him around as an imposition. When he doesn't understand her English, she trumpets the repeated phrases as if he were hard of hearing. He's put off by her rudeness and aggressiveness.

But when her land rover gets mired in the sand overnight, the shared ordeal loosens the tensions between them. They become friends, then lovers; what began as a reluctant obligation on Sandy's part turns into an idyll as they explore the landscape together—new and wondrous to both of them (she sees it through his eyes).

The movie's centerpiece section, in which Sandy and Hiro are the only characters, is worked out almost entirely in visual and emotional terms. When they sleep together for the first time, Sandy tries on his discarded trousers, as if she's trying to find out who this exotic stranger is. Their lovemaking has a touching solemnity—the feeling of a ritual.

As lit by the great cinematographer Ian Baker, the vast, nearly uninhabited Australian terrain becomes a metaphor for the human landscape the lovers uncover. It both imperils them and unites them; it's a setting for their unexpected romance and then, abruptly, the cause of the tragedy that brings that romance to an end. Swimming with Sandy in a lake, Hiro dives into a rock and dies. The last section of the movie focuses on how Sandy deals with the horror of returning his body to

civilization and the inexpressible grief of losing a companion who was never really hers.

Alison Tilson's excellent screenplay is remarkable in this final act, especially in the scenes involving Hiro's widow, who arrives from Kyoto to claim his body. And though Tsunashima gives a graceful, understated performance, when he retires from the movie it becomes indisputably Collette's. She may be the most underappreciated of current actresses because she submerges herself so completely in her roles that you hardly recognize her from picture to picture. A faddish star like Nicole Kidman takes on one high-profile project after another and rarely seems right in any of them; it's a guessing game as to whether she's more glaringly miscast as a consumptive bombshell, a southern belle or Virginia Woolf. Collette, however, glides from one distinctive part to another in movies like *Emma*, *Shaft* and *About a Boy* and seems incapable of making a false step. (She can even do musicals: she was the only bright spot in the sourball stage show *The Wild Party*, where she played a self-destructive flapper.)

In the last scenes, Sandy struggles to hold onto an intimacy that she knows she has no official right to feel, and that she can't even name. She can't tell her business partner, her mother or her closest friend what she's going through.

There's a marvelous exchange with her mother, a sweet, sentimental woman whose impulse is to send a sympathy card to Hiro's family. "You can't send a condolence card to a complete stranger," Sandy protests, emphasizing that they don't know his wife's feelings or her traditions. What she's really upset about, of course, is that she herself reached across cultural boundaries and got close to this man—and she too is in need of condolences. Collette conveys this woman's impossible situation with extraordinary delicacy.

Sandy's salvation comes from the most surprising of places—the widow. Collette has a wonderful moment when she sees Hiro's wife crying silently across a room. You can feel her impulse to go over and commiserate, and her recognition that she can't. But she finds a way to pay tribute to the dead man without disclosing her own relationship to him, and in the end it's the widow who reaches out to her. *Japanese Story* has a lingering plaintiveness; it's truly memorable.