



Anthony Hopkins in *The World's Fastest Indian*

GO SPEED RACER

The World's Fastest Indian

review by M. Faust

The New Zealand character, says filmmaker Roger Donaldson (a Kiwi himself, so he ought to know) is marked by a “candor” spirit. Use what you have to get the job done rather than wasting time complaining about what you don’t have. If you can’t do it the ways it’s supposed to be done, find some other way.

Donaldson, who has been successful as a director of Hollywood films like *No Way Out*, *Species* and *The Recruit*, started his career in New Zealand with a documentary about Burt Munro, a septuagenarian who claimed to have set a world speed record with an ancient motorcycle that he had spent years modifying in the cinder block shack where he lived. Munro’s claim was not only true but even more surprising than it sounded: He set his record officially on the salt flats at Bonneville, Utah when he was already in his late 60s, using equipment that was so amateurish in the eyes of the officials who manage the Bonneville trials that they thought to let him compete would be tantamount to aiding his suicide.

That documentary faded into oblivion, in the manner of most work by aspiring young filmmakers, but as Donaldson became an international success he kept the goal of doing Munro’s story in more depth. You can tell how confident he is in the film just from its title, *The World’s Fastest Indian*, a title that almost seems designed to hide it from the viewers that would best appreciate this, the kind of feel-good character story that audiences over the age of 30 are always complaining never gets made anymore.

Said viewers—all of you who made *Uncle Nino* and *Nosey Parker* word-of-mouth hits in recent years—may be even more confused by the expanded knowledge that *The World’s Fastest Indian* stars Anthony Hopkins. But the “Indian” of the title refers to Burt’s motorcycle, a 1920 Indian Scout. That may mean something to those of you who are mechanically inclined, and you may therefore get something out of this film that I did not. For those of you as automotively obtuse as I, however, rest assured that this movie does not expect you to know the difference between a cam and a crankshaft.

Instead, it’s pretty much a showcase for Hopkins. In an interview included with the press notes, he says, “I’ve had a good career playing psychopaths or uptight people, and I’m fed up with those, I don’t want to play any more of them. This is my life now, I’m a very happy guy and Burt Munro’s philosophy and character suits my temperament.”

And there’s the movie in a nutshell. When we first meet Burt it’s the mid 1960s. He’s about as old as the century, lives alone on a pension in a cinder block shack, and we can infer that he must be a fairly likeable fellow from the fact that his neighbors have not had him locked up for crimes ranging from tuning the Indian in the pre-dawn hours (among the modern amenities it lacks is a muffler) to generally lowering the property values (his solution to their insistence that he mow his lawn is a marvel of simplicity, albeit one to which you would not want your own neighbors to resort).

After years of perfecting the Indian’s performance, Bert decides it’s time to realize his dream, to see how fast it can go on the Bonneville salt flats. (Apparently the fastest you can go there is the fastest you can go anywhere.) Despite the proceeds from a pig auction the locals hold in his benefit, he has to use creative means to get himself and the Indian to the U.S. and up to Utah.

Much of *The World’s Fastest Indian* involves Bert’s interaction with the people he encounters on his trip, like a Latino car salesman (Paul Rodriguez) who sells him a car in exchange for some mechanical work, or a desert widow (Diane Ladd) who helps him after an accident. Some of these somewhat strain credulity, like his friendship with a transvestite motel clerk (Chris Williams, whom you probably won’t recognize as rap star “Krazee Eyez Killa” from “Curb Your Enthusiasm”).

But Hopkins makes it work, using his characteristic restraint for a fellow who might easily have turned into a Kiwi equivalent of Crocodile Dundee. He’s so engaging that by the time he gets to Bonneville and discovers a whole range of obstacles he hadn’t even considered (Pre-registration? Safety chute?), you fear that he might be blocked from his dream, even though, as Roger Ebert notes, this movie is not called *The World’s Second Fastest Indian*.

The World’s Fastest Indian is no masterpiece—it’s predictable, a bit too long, and features one of those irritating musical scores that seems to worry that you won’t know how to interpret the emotional context of a scene without a hundred violins. But it’s involving and likeable in a low-key manner that leaves you smiling without putting you through the wringer. Hopefully it will have a chance to connect with its audience before heading to the video and cable TV.

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