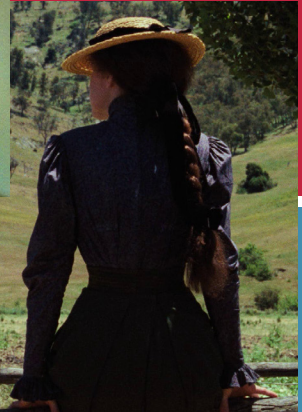


# Treasures from the Yale Film Archive



## ***My Brilliant Career***

Thursday, September 7, 7 p.m.

Humanities Quadrangle Alice Cinema

Directed by **Gillian Armstrong**

Screenplay by **Eleanore Witcombe**

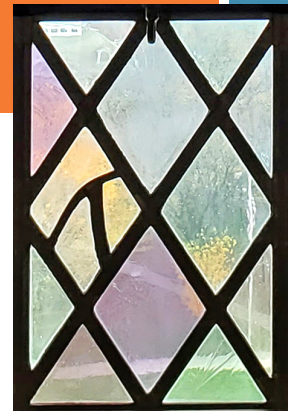
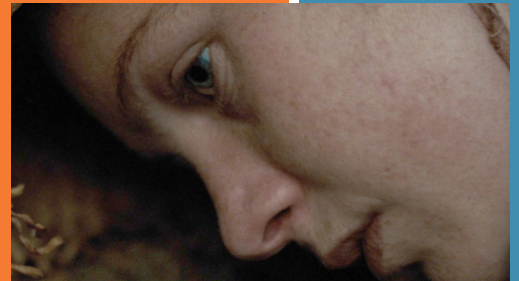
Based on the novel by **Miles Franklin**

Cinematography by **Donald McAlpine**

Produced by **New South Wales Film Corporation** (1979), 100 mins.

Starring **Judy Davis, Sam Neill, Wendy Hughes, Robert Grubb,**

**Aileen Britton, and Patricia Kennedy**



# Treasures from the Yale Film Archive

A SERIES OF CLASSIC AND CONTEMPORARY FILMS PRESENTED IN 35MM BY THE YALE FILM ARCHIVE

Gillian Armstrong's *My Brilliant Career* was the first Australian feature film directed by a woman in 46 years, and it stands as a major work of feminist cinema. Born in 1950, Armstrong hoped at best to become a theatrical set designer. But 1970 saw the establishment of the Australian Film Development Corporation, which provided production funds and a distribution network, enabling Armstrong to begin directing short films that same year. In 1973, the Corporation opened the Australian Film and Television School, of which Armstrong was one of the 12 initial graduates. The international acclaim for *My Brilliant Career* placed Armstrong alongside Phillip Noyce (a film school classmate), Bruce Beresford, George Miller, Fred Schepisi, and Peter Weir as a leading figure of the Australian New Wave.

Other women on *My Brilliant Career*'s production team included producer Margaret Fink, screenwriter Eleanor Witcombe, production designer Luciana Arrighi, and costume designer Anna Senior (earning the film's only Oscar nomination). The source is itself a landmark feminist work. Published in 1901, the semi-autobiographical novel *My Brilliant Career*, written by 19-year-old Stella Maria Sarah Miles Franklin under the gender-effacing pseudonym Miles Franklin, is often cited as the first Australian novel (the Commonwealth of Australia having been created that year by the merging of six colonies). Franklin's book was acclaimed not only for its bold presentation of a young woman battling the temptations of romance and marriage to pursue a career, but also for its expression of the country's spirit. As the National Museum of Australia's website observes: "The book captured the mood of the bush, and helped shape Australia's perception of itself at a turning point in its history. Sybylla's struggle to free herself from the impositions of 19th century rural life reflected the emerging women's movement. The book powerfully resonated with an Australia growing more confident in its identity, and with young women who had witnessed some political change but still felt frustrated with their lack of social and economic prospects."

*My Brilliant Career* was filmed in October and November, 1978, entirely on location in New South Wales. In recreating the turn-of-the century landscapes and interiors (of both

---

**DID YOU KNOW** Jane Campion, born in New Zealand but, like Armstrong, a graduate of the Australian Film and Television School, has said that *My Brilliant Career* inspired her to become a filmmaker.

---

lower and upper classes), Arrighi and cinematographer Donald McAlpine were influenced by Australian impressionist painters Arthur Streeton and Tom Roberts, as well as by Claude Monet and Édouard Vuillard. One of Armstrong's inspired touches, not in the novel, was Sybylla's piano playing, which enabled the director to incorporate the opening movement of Robert Schumann's "Scenes from Childhood" as the film's main theme.

In only her second film, 23-year-old Judy Davis vividly portrays, as Sybylla describes herself, a "larrikin" (Australian slang for a young person who is mischievous and rowdy, and who acts without regard for social convention). As critic Keith Watson has written, "Through Davis's subtle, complex performance, which convincingly captures the awkward transition from mid-adolescence to young adulthood, Sybylla comes to life as an intricate mix of steely determination, childlike naïveté, adolescent lust, and profound yearning." Davis won two BAFTAs — Most Promising Newcomer and Best Actress — and went on to international stardom in an almost non-stop brilliant career, including films with Australian directors Noyce, Schepisi, and Jocelyn Moorhouse, as well as with David Lean, James Lapine, Woody Allen, Joel Coen, and Sofia Coppola.

Armstrong, whose determination to triumph in a man's world mirrored that of Franklin and Sybylla, has succeeded with other period pieces such as *Mrs. Soffel*, *Little Women* (1994: her biggest box-office success), *Oscar and Lucinda*, *Charlotte Gray*, and *Death Defying Acts*, and with contemporary dramas such as *High Tide* (reuniting her with Davis) and *The Last Days of Chez Nous*. Also notable is her first paid work as a director, the documentary short *Smokes and Lollies* (1976), about the lives of three 14-year-old working class South Australian girls, whom Armstrong subsequently revisited at ages 18, 26, 33, and 48, resulting in five films in the tradition of Michael Apted's *Up* series.

📖 [library.yale.edu/film](http://library.yale.edu/film)     @yalefilmarchive

Yale UNIVERSITY LIBRARY  
Film Archive

**NEXT UP** The early films of Senegalese filmmaker Ousmane Sembène screen on **September 14 and 21 at 7 p.m.**, and a 25th anniversary screening of *The Big Lebowski* rolls on **September 15, 7 p.m.**