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Study Guide

Strictly Ballroom

SYNOPSIS

At the Waratah Championships ballroom dancer Scott Hastings goes against Federation rules and impulsively dances his own steps, causing partner Liz Holt to dump him. Then Fran, ugly duckling of the beginners' class, offers to be Scott's new partner. Initially sceptical, he is persuaded by her ideas, and together they plan to dance their own steps at the Pan-Pacific Grand Prix Championships.

But Scott's rebelliousness does not go unchallenged. His mother Shirley and coach Les Kendall try various ways to prevent Scott from dancing with Fran, while corrupt President Barry Fife plots Scott's downfall by concocting a story about his parents' dancing career that will convince him to compete at the Pan-Pacifcs without Fran.

All seems lost until Scott's father Doug reveals the truth. With Barry Fife's desperate attempts at sabotage having little effect, Scott and Fran complete their spectacular dance to rapturous applause from the crowd. Everyone takes to the dance floor in celebration.

CAST

Scott Hastings	<i>Paul Mercurio</i>
Fran	<i>Tara Morice</i>
Barry Fife	<i>Bill Hunter</i>
Doug Hastings	<i>Barry Otto</i>
Shirley Hastings	<i>Pat Thomson</i>
Liz Holt	<i>Gia Carides</i>
Les	<i>Peter Whitford</i>
Rico	<i>Antonio Vargas</i>
Ya Ya	<i>Armonia Benedito</i>
Ken Railings	<i>John Hannan</i>
Tina Sparkle	<i>Sonia Kruger</i>
Charm Leachman	<i>Kris McQuade</i>
Wayne Burns	<i>Pip Mushin</i>
Vanessa Cronin	<i>Leonie Page</i>
Kylie	<i>Lauren Hewett</i>
Luke	<i>Steve Grace</i>

CREDITS

Director	<i>Baz Luhrmann</i>
Producer	<i>Tristram Miall</i>
Screenplay	<i>Baz Luhrmann and Craig Pearce</i>
Running Time	<i>94 Minutes</i>

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Australian director Baz Luhrmann's flamboyant and colourful debut feature *Strictly Ballroom* (1992) opens with a theatrical swish of red velvet curtains and leads us into the larger-than-life world of competitive ballroom dancing. It tells the story of Scott and Fran, who rebel against Dance Federation rules in order to dance their own steps. The film is the first in Baz Luhrmann's 'red curtain' film trilogy, and can also be described as a combination of the following: a fairy tale, a romantic comedy, a dance musical, even a satire.

This study guide is aimed at teachers who are teaching the film as a comparative text in the Leaving Certificate English syllabus. As well as sections relevant to modes of comparison such as **The World of the Film**, (for Cultural Context/Social Setting) and **Hero, Heroine, Villain**, a central feature of the study guide is our exclusive interview with director Baz Luhrmann. He discusses his artistic vision and defines red curtain cinema, the concept central to his trilogy of films *Strictly Ballroom* (1992), *Shakespeare's Romeo & Juliet* (1996) and *Moulin Rouge* (2001).

We are also very pleased to include an interview with *Strictly Ballroom* producer Tristram Miall in which he discusses his involvement in the making of *Strictly Ballroom*, and also provides insights into his role as a film producer in the Australian film industry. Both interviews will provide invaluable background material for both teachers and students.

Strictly Ballroom is an excellent choice for comparative study as it is accessible, fun and fast-paced, but it also has serious themes and ultimately celebrates Australia's multicultural society, a view that has strong resonance for contemporary Ireland.

I hope you will find this guide an interesting, useful and enjoyable resource in your teaching of *Strictly Ballroom*.

Grateful thanks to my colleagues Alicia McGivern, Gráinne Humphreys and Liz Fehilly for their valuable suggestions and editorial contributions.

Ann Ryan

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IMAGES OF AUSTRALIA

“You will find a warm welcome waiting for you in Australia, one of the most fascinating and spectacular places on earth. A land of contrasts, at once a youthful, vital nation and the home of the planet’s oldest continuous culture.” ¹

A SPECTACULAR HOLIDAY DESTINATION

Just as the Irish Tourist Board represents Ireland in a certain way to attract tourists, the Australian Tourist Commission promotes travel to Australia by highlighting its bright, colourful aspects. Famous landmarks such as the Sydney Opera House, Uluru (Ayers Rock) and the Great Barrier Reef are featured as well as Australia’s indigenous people, the aborigines.

STEREOTYPICAL IMAGES

What expectations do we have of Australia and its people? There are several familiar Australian stereotypes, including the enduring image of Aussie bushman hero seen in Paul Hogan’s *Crocodile Dundee*. This is continued in recent film release *Crocodile Hunter: Collision Course* (2002) starring TV naturalist Steve Irwin.

A more negative stereotype is that of a typical Australian male being depicted as beer-swilling, loud-mouthed and uncultured, like Barry Humphries’ comic creation Sir Les Patterson, ‘Australia’s cultural attaché.’ Characters and settings in Australian TV soaps such as *Home & Away* and *Neighbours* conform to stereotypical views of Australia, such as the mistaken belief that it is permanently sunny there, or that people are always tanned, good-looking, athletic ‘surfie’ types. Perhaps the soaps’ appeal lies in their representation of Australia as a sunny suburban paradise, a far cry from the more downbeat settings of *Eastenders* or *Fair City*.

A SUCCESSFUL MIGRANT NATION

Ever since Australia was first colonised by British settlers more than two hundred years ago, there have been successive waves of migration to its shores. The majority of migrants came from Britain, Ireland and northern Europe until after the Second World War, when Australia welcomed refugees from war-torn Europe and also began to accept thousands of migrants from southern European countries such as Italy and Greece. (Melbourne for instance has the largest Greek population of any city in the world outside Greece).

Today, Australians whose ancestors hail from Britain or Ireland² still form a majority of Australia’s population but the country has also become one of the most successful migrant nations in the world, welcoming people from all corners of the globe to its shores. Notwithstanding the 2002 government’s controversial stance on illegal immigrants, contemporary Australia is a diverse and vibrant multicultural society.

AUSTRALIAN CINEMA*

During the 1970s the Australian film industry experienced a revival of its fortunes. The development of a government-assisted film industry reflected a desire to develop and nurture a national cinema. Films made during the 1970s and since reflect Australia’s increasing cultural diversity.



The Dish, Australia's biggest ever box office success

Peter Weir is an important figure in the Australian film renaissance. His haunting and atmospheric *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975) was a success both in Australia and internationally. Adapted from the novel by Joan Lindsay, the film is set in 1900 on Valentine's Day, when a group of schoolgirls on a picnic at Hanging Rock in Victoria disappear without trace.

In the 1980s the phenomenally successful *Crocodile Dundee* (1987) relied on the bushman stereotype for its comedy. In addition to 1990s 'kitsch comedy'³ successes like *Strictly Ballroom*, *Priscilla*, *Queen of the Desert* (1993) and *Muriel's Wedding* (1994), other comedies also proved popular. *The Dish* (2000) emerged as Australia's biggest ever box office

success. This gentle comedy is set in July 1969 in a small rural town in New South Wales. Australian scientists become unlikely heroes because of the part they play in broadcasting the first TV pictures of the Apollo moon landing.

Another box office success is Phillip Noyce's film *Rabbit Proof Fence* (2002), which explores a significant and tragic part of Australian history: 'The Stolen Generations.' From 1905 to 1970 part-Aboriginal children were forcibly removed from their families and placed in institutions. Set in the 1930s and starring Kenneth Branagh, the film tells the story of three Aboriginal girls who escape from the institution they have been placed in and walk 1500 kilometres across the continent to find their way home.

- 1 Australian Tourist Commission Traveller's Guide 2002, p3
- 2 Known as Anglo-Australians, or Anglo-Celtic Australians
- 3 Adrian Martin, *More than Muriel*, Sight and Sound Vol. 5 No. 6 (1995) p30 – 32 (p30)

Picnic at Hanging Rock



Rabbit Proof Fence
© Miramax
Release Date Ireland: 8/11/02

STUDENT EXPLORATIONS

- 1 Travel brochures promote Australia as one of the world's most spectacular holiday destinations. What impressions of Ireland are shown in travel brochures, do you think?
- 2 Describe a stereotypical Australian, then a typical Irish person. In what ways are these stereotypes limiting? Where do we see such stereotypes used?
- 3 Do you think Australian TV soaps are realistic? What images of Australia do they present? Compare their stories, characters and settings to an Irish or UK TV soap.
- 4 Compare another Australian film to *Strictly Ballroom*. In what ways are they similar/different? What impressions of Australia do you receive in each film?

***See Filmography (Appendix F) for more details of Australian films.**





BAZ LUHRMANN'S VISION

ORIGINS OF STRICTLY BALLROOM

Ballroom dancing is hugely popular in several countries around the world. With its garish costumes, obsession with detail and rigorous rules, it has evolved into a dance sport and has recently been introduced to the Olympics. There are clubs and societies in countries around the world devoted to the promotion of ballroom dancing. Baz Luhrmann was introduced to the world of competitive ballroom dancing as a child growing up in Australia. His mother was a dancing teacher, and he took lessons, danced competitively and became a champion ballroom dancer himself.

AT DRAMA SCHOOL

By 1985 Luhrmann was studying drama at the prestigious National Institute of Dramatic Art¹ (NIDA) in Sydney, where he felt that its traditional teaching methods and strict rules were oppressive, stifling students' creativity. Inspired by this experience, the original premise for *Strictly Ballroom* was based on overcoming oppression. Luhrmann chose the world of ballroom dancing because of his own experiences in that world.

A DEVISED PLAY

The first version of *Strictly Ballroom* was a thirty minute devised play, created by Luhrmann and fellow students (including long time friend and co-writer Craig Pearce). Luhrmann then directed the first ever stage production of *Strictly Ballroom* at NIDA. The play's success led to its selection for the 1986 World Youth Theatre Festival in Czechoslovakia, where it received awards for best production and best director. Luhrmann's theatre

company, the Six Years Old Company, subsequently revived the play for a successful season at the Wharf Theatre in Sydney before touring to the World Expo at Brisbane, Queensland in 1988.

FROM PLAY TO FILM

The next phase in *Strictly Ballroom's* development, however, was more challenging. Adapting the successful stage play into a film became what the filmmakers describe as a "David and Goliath journey". Producers Tristram Miall and Ted Albert had approached Baz Luhrmann with a view to buying the film rights. They agreed that he would write the script and direct the film. In 1991 Baz Luhrmann and Craig Pearce wrote the final screenplay for *Strictly Ballroom*, but the Australian Film Finance Corporation were cautious about financing a first time director, producer and a largely unknown team. Few films were being made in Australia in the early 1990s, as it was in the midst of an economic recession.

SETBACKS

Despite several setbacks, including the sudden death of producer Ted Albert, the money was eventually raised to make the film, with the Australian Film Finance Corporation as main investor. But there were other difficulties along the way, including Paul Mercurio (Scott) injuring his ankle just before the start of filming, and the Film Finance Corporation allegedly 'hating' the film after viewing a rough-cut. (See Interview with Tristram Miall). Despite all these difficulties, *Strictly Ballroom* became a huge hit in Australia and overseas. Made for \$3.5 million Australian dollars, it screened at the prestigious international film festival at Cannes, where

it won the Festival's *Prix de Jeunesse*. *Strictly Ballroom* also won several other awards, including eight Australian Film Institute Awards, three British Academy Awards and a Golden Globe nomination.

VISION & PASSION

In many ways the 'David and Goliath' struggle to get the film made reflects Scott's struggle to dance his own steps in the film. His creativity and vision eventually win out despite the obstacles in his way. Similarly Baz Luhrmann's team overcame what seemed to be impossible odds to triumph. Their vision and passion, combined with tenacity, hard work and determination helped them succeed in getting *Strictly Ballroom* made. Given the economic circumstances in Australia at the time, and the fact that Baz Luhrmann had never directed a feature film before, this was indeed a substantial achievement.

STUDENT EXPLORATIONS

- 1 Baz Luhrmann and the producers have described the experience of making *Strictly Ballroom* into a film as a 'David & Goliath' struggle. Find out about the story of 'David & Goliath', and discuss how it has parallels with Scott's story.
- 2 The theme of overcoming oppression was the premise for Baz Luhrmann and fellow NIDA students when they devised the play version of *Strictly Ballroom*. The students felt oppressed by the strict regime at their drama school. Do you have any personal experience or knowledge of such a regime? Give some examples.
- 3 Discuss the different stages by which *Strictly Ballroom* became a film. What impressions do you receive of Baz Luhrmann and his team?



“All our films use this cinema form which we call theatricalised cinema, red curtain cinema...” Baz Luhrmann

Moulin Rouge (2001)
© Twentieth Century Fox

RED CURTAIN CINEMA

Baz Luhrmann describes his trilogy of films as examples of red curtain cinema. This concept, which he defines as a theatricalised, participatory cinema form set in a heightened world, is central to our understanding of his work. *Strictly Ballroom*, the first film in the red curtain trilogy was released in 1992, followed by Shakespeare's *Romeo & Juliet* (1996) and finally *Moulin Rouge* (2001).

According to Baz Luhrmann, there are rules and conventions in red curtain cinema just as in other film genres.

The first rule is that the story needs to be set in **a heightened creative world**. *Strictly Ballroom* opens with a theatrical swish of red velvet curtains. The opening image leads us into the world of competitive ballroom dancing, peopled by larger-than-life characters obsessed with winning.

The second rule is that the story should be based on **a recognisable story shape**. In *Strictly Ballroom*, the David & Goliath myth can be seen quite clearly in Scott's struggle against the mighty Dance Federation. Similarly, the fairy tale about the ugly duckling being transformed into a swan is mirrored in the character of Fran.

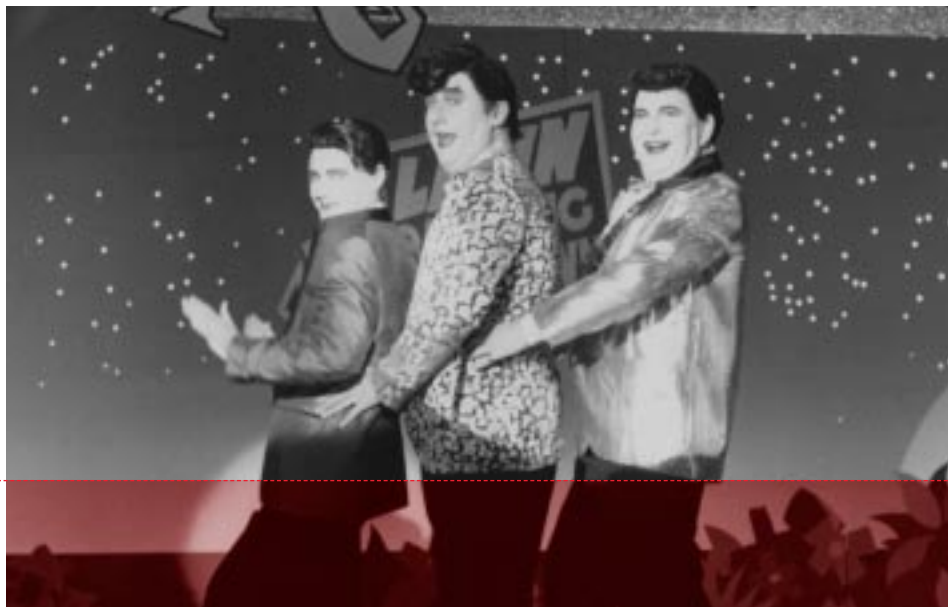
Thirdly, and finally, red curtain cinema is also **audience participation cinema**. For Luhrmann, the audience needs to be aware that what they are watching is not meant to be real. Unlike other films which give the illusion of reality, red curtain films use 'devices' to keep the audience aware that the film is heightened and stylised. In *Strictly Ballroom* the central device is dancing; in *Romeo & Juliet* it is

Shakespearean language, and *Moulin Rouge* is a musical. Once the audience accepts that they are always watching a movie and are not seduced into believing that it is real, Luhrmann believes that they will be able to participate actively in the viewing experience.



Romeo & Juliet (1996)
© Twentieth Century Fox

See (Appendix A) Interview with director Baz Luhrmann for a detailed account of his artistic vision & (Appendix B) Interview with producer Tristram Miall for details of his involvement in *Strictly Ballroom*.



DISCUSSION

Luhrmann is influenced by radical theatre practitioner **Bertolt Brecht**, who was interested in creating ‘active spectators’ in theatre audiences. To achieve this he employed distancing techniques to ensure that the spectator stands outside the experience.² Brecht’s aim was to keep the audience intellectually involved, but emotionally detached. Baz Luhrmann wants the audience to be active participants, aware that they are watching a film. He describes red curtain cinema as being like ‘Brecht with heart’ because he also welcomes their emotional involvement.

So does red curtain cinema work, and are we convinced by it as a new cinema form? The world created in *Strictly Ballroom* is indeed larger-than-life, flamboyant and stylised. And in Shakespeare’s *Romeo & Juliet* and *Moulin Rouge* Luhrmann continues the concept of red curtain cinema in ever more fantastical ways. The Verona in Shakespeare’s *Romeo & Juliet* is hot, sexy and violent, a created world comprising of twentieth century icons. *Moulin Rouge*, the final film in the red curtain trilogy, is an extraordinary musical love story, set in a computer-generated Paris of 1899, featuring music from artists as diverse as Randy Crawford and Nirvana. Luhrmann’s red curtain films have been box office successes and are hugely popular with audiences. This is clear evidence that many people enjoy the experience of watching his films, and are willing, either consciously or unconsciously, to accept the conventions of red curtain cinema. Film critic Michael Dwyer is an enthusiastic admirer of Baz Luhrmann’s work, as the following extract

from his review of *Moulin Rouge* reveals: *“The director clearly exults in the thrilling theatricality of the genre, which he communicates so infectiously to the audience in this exuberant, intoxicating spectacle, a blissfully romantic paean to the power of love.”*³

There is no doubt that Baz Luhrmann’s red curtain films offer audiences larger-than-life fantastical created worlds, stunning visual spectacle and stories based on recognisable myths. But perhaps the audience participation element of red curtain cinema works more convincingly in *Strictly Ballroom* and *Romeo & Juliet* than in *Moulin Rouge* because in the final film of the trilogy the pace is just too frenetic and rushed. Those who love watching MTV may disagree, but in my view the audience simply does not have time to absorb the myriad images, sounds, sweeping camera angles and special effects. Far from encouraging our emotional involvement with the characters and storyline, these distancing techniques in fact have the opposite effect.

A COMBINATION OF GENRES

Baz Luhrmann defines *Strictly Ballroom* as red curtain cinema, but it also draws from several traditions in film and theatre: slapstick elements of silent film; commedia dell’arte; even ‘mockumentary’. It can be described as a combination of the following genres: a romantic comedy, a fairy tale, a dance musical, a satire, and finally an example of ‘kitsch comedy.’ Baz Luhrmann uses these conventions in *Strictly Ballroom*, but he also parodies them. The film self-consciously subverts our expectations of the backstage musical, so that far from being a celebration of the show business dance community as in

films like *Top Hat* (1935), the all-powerful Dance Federation is represented as the enemy in *Strictly Ballroom*.

‘Mockumentary’ interviews in the opening sequence provide another example of the film’s parodying of conventions.

STUDENT EXPLORATIONS

- 1 Define ‘red curtain cinema’ in your own words.
- 2 We are used to seeing films at the cinema that are set in the ‘real world’. Give some examples of films like this. How do Baz Luhrmann’s films differ? Do you prefer films that have a realistic setting/storyline or films that are obviously set in a heightened, fantasy world?
- 3 What do you think of Baz Luhrmann’s concept of red curtain cinema? Does it work, in your opinion? (Consider Luhrmann’s other films, *Romeo & Juliet* and *Moulin Rouge* as well as *Strictly Ballroom* in your response).
- 4 *Strictly Ballroom* also draws from other traditions in film and theatre. Give examples of key moments from the film that illustrate its combination of genres (eg. ‘mockumentary’, fairy tale, dance musical).

1 The National Institute of Dramatic Art (NIDA) is one of Australia’s best-known drama schools. Graduates include Mel Gibson, Cate Blanchett and Toni Collette.

2 The concept of ‘verfremdungseffekt’, translated loosely in English as distance alienation or the ‘A’ effect, is used in Brecht’s epic theatre to remind the audience that they are watching a play. (A-effects include a presentational style of acting, use of narration, mask, song, and actors playing a variety of roles).

3 Dwyer M., *The Irish Times*, 5 September 2001



THE WORLD OF THE FILM

As we have seen in the discussion on red curtain cinema, one of its conventions is that the story takes place in a heightened, fantastical world. There are two contrasting worlds in *Strictly Ballroom*. Both are located physically in the suburbs of Sydney, but they are distinct and separate, reflecting the film's collision of wills and cultures.

THE BALLROOM DANCING WORLD

The first world we enter is the competitive world of ballroom dancing. Locations in this world are always interior. It is represented as being fiercely conservative, with rigid rules that must be obeyed. Characters are Anglo-Australian comic stereotypes, whose costumes are garish and glitzy. They wear heavy make up, have elaborate, cartoon-like hairdos, and are overly concerned with outward appearances. Obsessed with winning ballroom dancing competitions, they are unable to talk about anything else. They have created an insular, claustrophobic world where outsiders are not welcome and innovation is seen as a threat.

The heightened and stylised ballroom dancing world satirises aspects of Australian society. It serves as a metaphor for a particular Anglo-Australian attitude, shown here as hierarchical and conservative. The Dance Federation's obsession with rules and conformity could also be said to represent a fear of change in a part of Australian society that discourages spontaneity and creativity.

Scott's crowd-pleasing steps are seen as pointless compared to the obsession with winning competitions. After Scott and Liz lose the Waratah Championships Liz is furious. Scott tries to persuade her to listen to his ideas but she is only interested in winning:

Scott: I'm just asking you what you think of the steps.

Liz: I don't think. I don't give a shit about them. We lost. (**New Partners: Sequence 2**)

FRAN'S WORLD

The second world is the Toledo Milk Bar, where Fran's Spanish family lives. As recent migrants to Australia they are shown as living on the fringes of mainstream society, literally beside the railway tracks. Providing a stark contrast to the artificiality of the ballroom dancing world, their world is shown as more real. The exterior location suggests space and freedom. Characters are portrayed as more passionate and authentic than the winning-obsessed Anglo-Australians because they dance from the heart rather than from a desire to win competitions. Baz Luhrmann explains:

"The Anglo world took the Paso Doble, which is a dance of expression, and put a whole lot of rules on it, and made it about winning. Whereas in Fran's family, dancing is a tradition, it comes from life, it is an expression of life."

The film tries to capture the original passion inherent in dance before it became restrained and stifled. When Ya Ya encourages Scott to "listen to the rhythm" (**Paso Doble: Sequence 5**), the film suggests that expression in dance should be lived and enjoyed, rather than made into a competitive sport.



FAMILY

Although they appear conventional enough, with a mother, father and two children, the Anglo-Australian Hastings family is shown as dysfunctional. The film subverts our expectations of the 'average' family. Shirley, like the other characters from the ballroom dancing world is one-dimensional. She is depicted as a stereotypical domineering wife, browbeating mild-mannered husband Doug. She is also a stage mother who lives vicariously through her children's successes. Shirley is ambitious for her son Scott to win the Pan Pacific Dance Championships, but only if he dances the Federation way.

Fran's Spanish family is portrayed more sympathetically, but also somewhat stereotypically. Like Cinderella, her real mother has died. Her father Rico is shown as swarthy, unshaven and ultra-strict. Fran's body language and actions suggest that she is afraid of him and when we first meet Rico after Scott walks Fran home (Sequence 3) his words to Fran are harsh. Fran's grandmother Ya Ya, dressed in black with a crucifix around her neck, grey hair tied back in a bun at first looks like a stereotypical 'ethnic' grandmother, but her appearance is deceptive. She is in fact Fran's ally, covering for her when she goes out, and revealing a playful sense of humour at Scott's expense during the Paso Doble scene (Sequence 5) when she speaks in Spanish about Scott's "nice body".

ROLES OF MEN, WOMEN, CHILDREN

Men

In the ballroom dancing world, the men appear to be in control. Barry Fife, the

ultimate patriarchal, authoritarian figure, treats women as decorative objects. His scenes with 'loyal companion' Charm Leachman (**No New Steps: Sequence 6**) and when he demonstrates the Bogie Pogo dance step to Wayne and Vanessa (**The Pan-Paciffs: Sequence 7**) reveal his sleazy side.

But elsewhere there are men who do not have such authority. The 'camp' representation of Les Kendall throughout the film indicates that he is homosexual. The fact that he is different, the film suggests, has not been to his advantage. Barry Fife calls him "a pathetic fag," at the Pan-Paciffs (Sequence 8) when Les discovers the truth about the 1967 Championships.

Doug Hastings is also different. Far from being the conventional male head of the family, he is bullied by his wife Shirley and seems to have no authority at home. Whenever he tries to talk to Scott he is ignored, until the Pan-Paciffs (Sequence 7) when he is finally able to make Scott listen.

Doug's role as father is in marked contrast to the way Rico is depicted. As a strict, authoritarian father, he is also portrayed as strong and masculine, his dance prowess seen as a macho attribute. He becomes a mentor, even a father figure to Scott when he teaches him about the real meaning of dance. (**Practising for the Pan-Paciffs: Sequence 6**).

Women

The film satirises Anglo-Australian women by depicting them as hysterical, bitchy and manipulative. The following melodramatic comments by Liz Holt suggest that men lead, at least on the dancefloor: "He

forced me into it - where the man goes the lady must follow - I had no choice."

(Waratah Championships: Sequence 1)

Liz's words are ironic, especially when we consider that she is the one who refuses to dance with Scott after he dances his own steps, and throws a temper tantrum when she does not get her own way (**New Partners: Sequence 2**). Similarly, Shirley bursts into tears at the dance studio when the efforts to get Scott and Liz back together fail.

Their portrayal is in marked contrast to the way Fran is depicted. Shown very much as a fairy tale heroine, Fran is shown more positively. Her shyness and lack of self-confidence give way to her blossoming courage and independence. Her natural appearance contrasts with the heavily made-up ballroom dancers, again reinforcing the idea that Fran is genuine and has more depth than the superficial female characters of the ballroom dancing world.

Children

There are two children in the film, Kylie, Scott's younger sister, and Luke, her dance partner. Both are aged ten, and are dressed as miniature ballroom dancers, complete with elaborate costumes and hairdos. Their function is to comment honestly and insightfully on the action, and they also provide comic asides, for example when Kylie says: "It's the inconceivable sight of Scott dancing with Fran," as she watches them dance backstage at the State Championships (Sequence 4). Kylie and Luke also act during the Pan-Paciffs (Sequence 8) to help Fran and Scott. Realising that Barry Fife plans to cut the music, they lock themselves into the sound booth so that his plans are thwarted. Their heroic

actions at the end and the way they cheer for Scott and Fran suggest that they represent a brighter future for dance.

WORK

Although dancing is an amateur pastime for most of the characters in the ballroom dancing world, they are so obsessed that it dominates their lives. For some of the characters, ballroom dancing also provides their livelihoods. Les Kendall and Shirley run Kendall's Dance Studio together. Shirley's explanation of why she dumped Doug at the Pan-Pacifica in 1967 reveals her fear of insecurity. It also suggests that in this world people feel they have to sacrifice their dreams to obtain job security:

"There was too much at stake. Our dancing career was on the line. I couldn't throw all that away on a dream. We had to survive. We would never have been able to teach."

(The Pan-Pacifica: Sequence 7)

Barry Fife displays quite a different attitude to work. He uses his position as Federation President to further his own business interests, notably the way he places his video, *Dance to Win*, on display at every opportunity, and gives a copy to Wayne as a sweetener to get him on his side against Scott **(The State Championships: Sequence 4)**.

By contrast, Fran's family business is the Toledo Milk Bar. Business does not seem to be booming, as the milk bar looks shabby and rundown. Its paintwork is dingy and worn and there are bins full of rubbish in front. In some ways the Toledo Milk Bar suggests an earlier era, the 1950s, when such places were first popular, and also when southern

European migrants started arriving in Australia. It is clear that Fran's family is not as financially well off as the Anglo-Australians. But the fiesta that takes place at the back of the house **(Paso Doble: Sequence 5)** conveys that there is life and soul here.

POWER

The Anglo-Australian characters are those who are depicted as having power in the film. But Barry Fife's power is represented as hierarchical and corrupt. During the Waratah Championships (Sequence 1) the Dance Federation judging panel is framed with a low angle shot, showing Barry and his fellow officials placed on a stage above the audience, reflecting their superior status. Barry is willing to fix the Pan-Pacific Grand Prix Dance Championships, so that Scott doesn't win, as his words to a drunk Ken Railings reveal:

"Your year, Ken. Just get on the floor, go through the motions and it's in the bag."

(Scott & Fran's Big Moment: Sequence 8)

Throughout the film, his unscrupulous methods reveal that he is willing to do anything to hang onto power. He is portrayed much like a corrupt politician or businessman who will do favours for certain people in order to gain personal advantages.

In contrast, Fran's family, who live on the edges of society, are depicted as less powerful because they are not part of the established, dominant Anglo-Australian culture. However, their sympathetic portrayal in the film suggests that despite their marginal status, they are culturally richer than their Anglo counterparts.





CLASS

Although the film shows two cultures in opposition, it is more difficult to position them in terms of class. The Anglo-Australians can be described as white working-class or lower middle-class. They have more money and status in society than the characters in the Spanish world, which places them in a higher position. Yet their values and attitudes are satirised in the film, so that the Anglo-Australian world is presented as tacky and artificial, lacking depth. The Spanish characters, living on the margins of an urban society can also be described as working-class. However, their values are celebrated in the film, placing them above the Anglo-Australians.

RACE

In the film the Anglo-Australian world is shown as dominant, and 'normal', with Fran's Spanish world represented as the ethnic 'other'. This could be said to mirror the migrant experience in Australia, where Anglo-Australians form a majority of the population and have lived there longer than more recent arrivals. Fran's experience at Kendall's Dance Studio reflects this marginal status. She is known as 'just Fran' rather than by her full name Francisca. She is reluctant to say her Spanish name because it reinforces her outsider status, making her a potential target for name-calling by Liz and Vanessa. Fran's appearance is also different. Her dark hair and natural skin provide a contrast to the artificial glamour of the other ballroom dancers. Shirley, in her role as cosmetician, is always encouraging Fran to use apricot scrub or Buf Puf to improve her skin, and tries making her up so that she looks like the

others. (**The Try-Outs: Sequence 3**). It is as if Fran's ethnicity marks her as different, and is considered a drawback to her integration and acceptance into the Anglo-Australian world. At the Pan-Pacifcs Fran tells Scott how difficult it has been for her:

"Frangipannidelasqueegymop. Wash the coffee cups Fran. How's your skin Fran?"

(**At the Pan-Pacifcs: Sequence 7**).

When Scott is introduced to the Spanish world, he is at first treated with suspicion by Rico (Paso Doble: Sequence 5). At first characters speak in Spanish in front of Scott, often at his expense, and as a way of excluding him from their conversation. For the first time Scott experiences what it is like to be an outsider. But after initial suspicion he is accepted. Scott is willing to learn from Rico and Ya Ya, and realises that the experience is enriching. It is interesting that as Rico and Ya Ya help Scott and Fran practice for the Pan-Pacifcs (Sequence 6) they begin to speak both Spanish and English, indicating their growing acceptance of him and their openness to the Anglo world.

The film's triumphant finale, which shows the two cultures uniting on the dance floor, offers a celebration of Australia's multicultural society. As characters from the ballroom dancing world and Fran's Spanish world dance together, Rico with Liz Holt, Ya Ya with Les, the film offers an optimistic ending. From being two separate, distinct cultures, the finale ensures that they intermingle, each enriched by the other. Only Barry Fife seems not to fit into this new, inclusive world, suggesting that he really does belong to a bygone era.

STUDENT EXPLORATIONS

- 1 Baz Luhrmann's describes the world of *Strictly Ballroom* as 'heightened and fantastical'. How does the film language used illustrate this? See Appendix E: Film Language. (Comment on costume, lighting, characters, camerawork, colour, music in each of the contrasting settings).
- 2 How does the film depict the Anglo Australian characters? How does this compare with the film's portrayal of Fran's Spanish family? Who is portrayed more sympathetically, do you think?
- 3 Many of the characters in *Strictly Ballroom* are cartoon-like and one dimensional. What advantages are there in creating characters that are stereotypes? Can you see any disadvantages?
- 4 "No new steps!" Why do you think some of the characters were so frightened of new dance steps? Discuss the relevant characters/key moments. Do you sympathise with any of them? Why/why not?
- 5 Do you agree with Baz Luhrmann that dance should be 'an expression of life' rather than a competitive sport? Do you have any personal experience of dancing competitively? (Irish dancing, for example) What is your opinion on such competitions?
- 6 How does the world of *Strictly Ballroom* differ from the cultural contexts/social settings of other comparative texts you have studied? Are there any similarities?



HERO, HEROINE, VILLAIN

Mainstream Hollywood cinema draws from principles and structures established in Greek mythology. Stories are driven by the struggle between a central hero and another, usually darker force. The conventional cinematic hero is strong and virile, who proves himself by overcoming obstacles set out for him by the narrative. The hero always achieves his goal and wins the love of a woman through combat or physical confrontation with another male.

HERO

Scott is the central character in the film. Positioned as the hero, he is a passionate, ambitious ballroom dancer who also wants to dance his own steps. Scott has to balance his desire to win with a need for individuality and creativity. As he progresses through the film, he overcomes pressures and obstacles in his way and finds the courage to dance his own steps with Fran at the Pan-Pacific.

How film language* positions Scott as the Hero

We know that Scott is the hero because he is central to the plot. The action he takes at the Waratah Championships when he dances his own steps is the catalyst for the story. But the way the story is told through film language also shows us that he is the hero. The camera frames Scott in particular ways to emphasise this. The following elements in camerawork illustrate how a film can position the hero:

- **Framing of shots** – the camera stays with the character as much as possible
- **Close-ups** of the character's face reveal how the character is feeling
- **Point-of-view** shots make the audience see things from his perspective

An Untypical Hero?

Scott is an untypical cinematic hero. His interest in artistic self-expression more than

a desire to win marks him as unconventional. He is also put under pressure to conform at different times during the film from Shirley, Les and Barry Fife, and he gives into the pressure more than once. The hero's qualities of physical strength and virility are shown through ballroom dancing, an activity not normally associated with macho cinematic heroes.

Scott's Journey

Scott also has to change his own attitudes to fully understand the true meaning of dance. There are several key moments in the film that illustrate Scott's emotional journey:

New Partners (Sequence 2)

Fran approaches Scott

When Fran asks to try out as Scott's new partner, he is dismissive of her ability:

Scott: You've come up to me who's been dancing since I was six years old... and you want to dance non-Federation, and convince the judges at the Pan-Pacific Grand Prix with 3 weeks to train?

Fran: Yeah.

Scott: I don't think so.

Scott only listens to Fran after she loses her temper and tells him he's a "gutless wonder" for not having the courage to give her a chance. Even after Scott accepts Fran as his new partner, he holds

*See also Appendix E: Film Language



onto the attitudes and beliefs of the ballroom dancing world. As they dance the rumba, he instructs Fran to “look at me like you’re in love,” emphasising the artificiality of the ballroom dancing style.

State Championships (Sequence 4) Scott and Fran dance together backstage

Scott is caught between wanting to win the competition and his desire to dance new steps with Fran. The opportunity to dance with Tina Sparkle is tempting, and he is hesitant when Fran asks him directly what he intends to do:

Fran: Are you going to dance with Tina?
Scott: I... she’s a champion.

But as Fran watches Tina Sparkle and Nathan perform, Scott follows her gaze. The close-up shot of his reaction indicates that he is beginning to realise what he wants to do. As he dances with Fran backstage the lyrics to the song ‘Perhaps’ – “If you can’t make your mind up, we’ll never get started,” fit the scene perfectly.

Paso Doble (Sequence 5) Rico and Ya Ya dance the Paso Doble

Rico and Ya Ya, having laughed at Scott and Fran’s ballroom dancing version of the Paso Doble, teach Scott their way. As Ya Ya encourages him to “listen to the rhythm,” Scott is transformed by the experience and learns that dancing from the heart makes it more meaningful and real.

The Pan-Pacific Grand Prix Dance Championship (Sequence 7) Doug reveals the truth

When Doug catches up with Scott and tells him the truth about the 1967 Championships, Scott realises that he can dance with Fran at last. The film moves into slow motion as he spins around to have

one last look at Liz, Shirley and the other competitors before jumping offstage to find Fran.

STUDENT EXPLORATIONS

- 1 What are the qualities of a typical Hollywood hero?
- 2 Give examples of 2 other films in which the central character can be described as heroic, and give reasons for your choices.
- 3 How does the film position Scott as the hero?
- 4 Give examples of key moments that show Scott as the hero, and explain how film language conveys this to the audience.

HEROINE

Fran

Fran is positioned as the heroine in the film. Like Scott, she is a complex character who has to overcome obstacles to achieve her goals. In many ways she fulfils the requirements of a fairy tale heroine, with clear similarities between her character and Cinderella or The Ugly Duckling. At first she is portrayed as a shy, awkward beginner dancer. Wearing glasses, no make-up and a baggy T-shirt, her plainness provides a contrast to the glitz and glamour of the other ballroom dancers.

The film shows Fran’s journey towards confidence and fulfilment through the changes in her costume and appearance. From the opening sequence which features a close-up shot of an ordinary looking Fran speaking to camera about Scott and Liz’s ‘wonderful steps’, she undergoes a transformation, blossoming into a beautiful, confident dancer.

An Untypical Heroine?

But if Fran fulfils many of the requirements of a fairy tale heroine, she is also untypical. Although Fran appears to be a passive and shy individual at the beginning, at important moments she shows determination and defiance. But she also falters under pressure at times, particularly when faced with Scott’s indecision, or when bullied by Shirley Hastings.

Fran’s Journey

Unlike the journey Scott makes to change his attitude towards dance, Fran already knows that she wants to dance ‘from the heart’. The Spanish proverb, ‘Vivir con miedo, es como vivir a medias/A life lived in fear is a life half-lived’ is one of the main messages of the film, and is closely associated with Fran. Her journey is about overcoming her fear so that she can reach her potential and live life to the full.

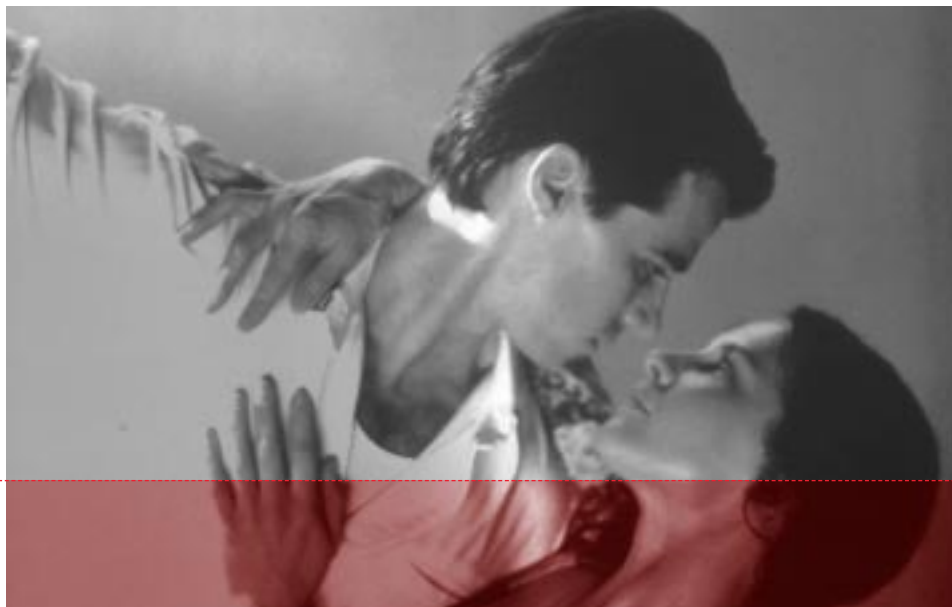
There are several key moments that illustrate Fran’s journey:

New Partners (Sequence 2) Fran approaches Scott

Fran’s angry response to Scott when he rejects her shows her strength of feeling:

“You’re just like the rest of them. You think you’re different but you’re not because you’re just really scared, you’re really scared to give someone new a go because you think, you know, they might just be better than you are. Well, you’re just pathetic and you’re gutless. You’re a gutless wonder. Vivir con miedo, es como vivir a medias!”

Fran is then positioned in the centre of the frame, standing in the spotlight, just as Scott had been earlier. This indicates



that she too wants to dance her own steps, and suggests that she and Scott are more closely linked than we have previously realised.

The Try-Outs (Sequence 3)

This montage sequence shows several aspects of the story that happen over the same period of time. Scott's try-outs with prospective new partners are juxtaposed with Scott and Fran continuing to practice together. The camera also cuts to dates being crossed off the calendar, indicating that time has passed, and the soundtrack, appropriately, is the song *Time After Time*.

The montage also shows how Fran's transformation is taking place. Gradually her appearance begins to change, her hair becomes darker and more attractive and she wears skirts rather than leggings. The use of colour is also significant, and by the end of the sequence she is shown wearing stronger colours (black and red), reflecting her growing confidence.

The State Championships (Sequence 4) Fran and Scott dance together backstage

After the revelation that Tina is to be Scott's new partner, Fran retreats backstage where Scott finds her. But the spell is broken when Liz Holt scathingly comments: "You're kidding!" when she sees Fran and Scott dancing together. Fran becomes self-conscious again, and falls over, injuring her ankle.

Shirley, Liz and Vanessa persuade Fran to go home

This scene in the dressing room is reminiscent of Cinderella, when Shirley (like the wicked stepmother), Vanessa and Liz (as the ugly sisters) persuade Fran to

go home rather than spoil Scott's chances. The use of low angle close-ups of Shirley, Vanessa and Liz, seen from Fran's point of view, represent them as villains and Fran as a victim of bullying.

Practising for the Pan-Pacifics (Sequence 6)

Fran and Scott practice for the Pan-Pacifics with the guidance and support of Rico and Ya Ya. When Fran dances complicated steps with confidence and poise during a practice with her father, the reaction shot of Rico shows his surprise and pride. It is as if he is seeing his daughter in a new light. Like Ya Ya, he accepts that Fran has overcome her shyness and is ready to dance at the Pan-Pacifics.

STUDENT EXPLORATIONS

- 1 Fran can be described as being like a fairytale heroine. Choose 3 key moments from the film that show parallels between Fran and a fairytale heroine.
- 2 How does the film reveal Fran's transformation? Give some examples of key moments where Fran's image changes, referring to costume, facial expression, movement, camerawork etc. Is the transformation more than just her appearance, do you think?

VILLAIN

Barry Fife

There is one obvious villain in the film - Barry Fife, President of the Australian Dance Federation. Symbolising a bygone patriarchal, authoritarian era Barry is portrayed as being shifty and corrupt. Like many of the characters in the ballroom dancing world, Barry is depicted as a cartoon-like stereotype. He is often filmed





in low angle close-ups, which make his face look grotesque, and his shiny blue suits, red face and false hairpiece convey to the audience that he is not to be trusted. Barry's fear of change, combined with his desperation to remain the all-powerful President by ruthless and corrupt means, results in his loss of power and authority at the end of the film. Barry fulfils the role of a typical cinematic villain, being the darker force that tries to prevent Scott from dancing his own steps. Despite his villainous ways, he is also responsible for many of the film's funniest moments, particularly when he confuses proverbs and sayings like: *'Let's not chuck the baby out with the bathtub,'* and *'One bad egg can rot the whole barrel.'* Several key moments reveal Barry Fife as a villain:

Waratah Championships (Sequence 1) Barry's office

Barry is sitting in his office behind his desk, a position that emphasises his authority. Speaking directly to camera, Barry's statement hints strongly that he is more than an impartial judge at the dance competition:

"You can dance any steps you like, but that doesn't mean you'll... win."

The film language used during this scene conveys Barry's untrustworthy nature. The lighting is shadowy and the camera zooms in to a close-up of his mouth when he says the word "win," which echoes ominously.

State Championships (Sequence 4) Barry talks to Les

Barry's motives become clearer as he tells Les that he wants Scott to dance with Tina Sparkle. To the tune of Danny Boy in the background, Barry makes a sentimental

speech about heroes to Les, which is both comic and satirical, bearing similarities to the kind of speeches we are accustomed to hearing from certain politicians:

"Let's not forget, Les, that a Pan-Pacific Champion becomes a hero, a guiding light to all dancers. Someone who'll set the right example... I love dancing, Les, and I won't let what we've fought for all these years be destroyed."

The film then cuts to an obviously drunk Ken Railings dancing with Liz, providing an ironic comment on what exactly Barry Fife has fought for all these years.

Practising for the Pan-Pacifics (Sequence 6) Barry's version of Doug's downfall

When Barry tells Scott that Doug's crazy steps lost the 1967 Pan-Pacifics for Shirley and Doug, the audience does not yet know the truth. Barry's fake version of events is conveyed to us through a flashback sequence, which he narrates. The past is depicted as a drama, a play-within-a-play in which Barry, naturally is represented positively. His version of the past is designed to create a rosy nostalgia, but his words sound unconvincing and false:

"I was your dad's best mate in those days, we used to scruff it together... Lessie'd come along of course. The three of us together, the old gang. We were a bunch of old funsters."

The Pan-Pacific Grand Prix Dance Championships (Sequence 7) Barry falls and knocks over the trophies

After Barry's schemes have been foiled, one of the last images we see of him is when he literally topples over the trophy

table and is shown on the floor looking dishevelled and defeated. The high angle camera shot used here makes him appear vulnerable for the first time. To symbolise Barry's sudden and dramatic fall from power, his hairpiece has fallen off and the trophies are scattered around him.

STUDENT EXPLORATIONS

- 1 How does the film communicate that Barry Fife is a villain? Comment on the film language used and refer to selected key moments in your response.
- 2 Is Barry Fife more than just a villain? Are there any reasons why we might feel sympathy for him in the film?

ADDITIONAL EXPLORATIONS

- 1 The final sequence at the Pan-Pacifics reveals acts of heroism by other characters in the film. Name the characters involved, and describe the actions they take that might be considered heroic.
- 2 From your study of *Strictly Ballroom* as well as other comparative texts, compare the heroic qualities of each of the main protagonists. In what ways are they similar/different?

BAZ LUHRMANN INTERVIEW

FII: When did you first see cinematic possibilities for *Strictly Ballroom*?

BL: Well, what happened was I did it as a play and then I met this producer and he said, look I'd like to buy the rights, and I said, well I'd like to make a film of it and they agreed to let me do the film. But I always thought it would be a film and I always thought it would be a musical as well. I mean all our films we make have this cinema form which we call theatricalised cinema, red curtain cinema - *Strictly Ballroom*, *Romeo and Juliet* and *Moulin Rouge*. *Strictly Ballroom* is very curious, and this students may find interesting in that it began a journey... The thing is though, when I set out to write it the producers wanted me to work with a legitimate screenplay writer, and I did but our first step there was naturalising it, we were making it a natural cinematic form. The problem with that was it became like *Dirty Dancing*, which is not to denigrate that film but you lost the metaphorical power, it just became a film about dancing. So I then had to wrest the process back, confront the reality that the best person to write with was my best friend who understood what I had been doing, and we then began the first steps in what we might call this theatricalised cinematic form. We then had to look back to the movies of the 1940s and 1950s, musicals, because they were metaphorical, they were heightened creative films.

FII: Which ones? Can you give any examples?

BL: Well if you take *Top Hat* for example, there is no question there is no social or economic reality to Venice in *Top Hat*. It's a heightened fantastical world. And the audience has to participate in the cinematic form, they can't be passive, they have got to accept the conventions and notions that are going on. So with that at play we were able to combine this idea of a metaphor that had meaning to us in a cinematic form. So it was both old and new in its form and we progressively developed that further and further with *Romeo and Juliet* and *Moulin Rouge*.

FII: Going back to the David and Goliath myth that inspired *Strictly Ballroom*, this is also reflected in your struggle to get funding for the film, isn't it?

BL: That's true. It was a David and Goliath journey to get it. Well that myth is about

overcoming seemingly impossible odds, and it's finally about the fact that the young David with the belief, comes up with the solution... No one wanted to finance the film, I was a first-time director, you know what I mean, there were lots of no's. I went to Cannes the year before and doors were slammed in my face. Not twelve months later the same people that had said, "What a waste of time..." were like crying with tears going, "Remember me?"

FII: That must've been a good feeling.

BL: Yeah well, revenge can taste sweet but the thing about a triumphant experience is that it leaves you, well it left me with a feeling of largesse. I didn't exactly put my arms round them and say "It is alright, I forgive you," but some people did ask me for forgiveness, it was quite extraordinary. The guy that was exhibiting *Strictly Ballroom*, when he saw the first cut of it in Australia, he took our two screens away and said, "This is horrible, it's like a filmed play." Pat Thomson, who went on to win the AFI award for best actress, he said we'd ruined her career. Well, you know that "horrible" film saved the major cinema chain that year. So I guess film and creativity is a place where no one knows anything and anything can happen, but it's also a great place to set the triumphant myth because quite often, you know, impossible stories come true.

FII: What was the cultural impact of *Strictly Ballroom* when it was released in Australia back in 1992?

BL: In Australia at the time, it also aligned itself with a struggle for self-definition. The fact that we could take our urban, suburban culture and we could be ironic about it and enjoy in it, laugh at it, see it as an art form, kitsch and camp and twist it, really struck a profound chord. And it also set free a lot of other creatives to go down that same road.

FII: Do you think it had an influence on subsequent Australian films then?

BL: Pretty much no question about that. I mean some of them have gone further and are more sophisticated. I mean *Muriel's Wedding* and *Priscilla* and that kind of suburban celebration cinema if you like. I mean, it's impossible to have made a film that was made for a couple of million dollars that made \$80 million worldwide, and won British Academy Awards and for that not to have an impact

on the culture of Australia. But beyond that, because it is David and Goliath, and because there was an election campaign at the time about republicanism it had political implications too. The all-powerful Federation, they have a very particular Australian attitude, which is an old guy going, "There's only one way to cha cha cha mate, and you've got to do it that way or else." It started to smash away at that.

FII: What films have influenced you? I mean you've mentioned *Top Hat*. Are there any other films that influenced you during the making of *Strictly Ballroom*?

BL: It's quite interesting. As a kid I loved musicals. When I was at drama school which is where the play came from, I was really in my serious artist phase, directing Strindberg and things like that, but I love for example *Taxi Driver*, *Apocalypse Now*, *The Seventh Seal*...

FII: Very different films.

BL: Completely different. But specifically it wasn't about love to make a movie. Specifically it was about a need to express an idea, a need to express throwing off oppression and utilising what was around you to do that. I would pass on this to students to be aware that the only thing they have to offer is that which is theirs alone. It's not that the stories change, they're not that original, it's the way the stories are told that gives them their particular brand or their particular voice. And what they should be looking for is not, "Gee, it's almost as good as Scorsese." It should be "It's very particular to me." And if you're doing it well enough, people should be able to hear your particular voice.

FII: Going back to red curtain cinema, you've talked about it as audience participation cinema. Can you explain what you mean by that?

BL: Basically and very simply, audience participation cinema is the antithesis of natural cinema. Natural cinema is where you're seduced into believing through a whole lot of devices and tricks that you're watching a real life story... In the old movies of the Forties and Fifties or in the musical form of cinema, or in a film like you know *Les Amants du Paradis*, or in Indian cinema, say Bollywood Cinema, there's no question that you're always watching a movie. The film itself continues to remind you that. Once you agree that you're always watching a movie, you're happy to accept one moment of very high comedy like stand up

comedy, then tragedy – brother kills brother – then break out into song. It allows you to celebrate the use of devices.

FII: So it's quite Brechtian really...

BL: It's very Brechtian. I like to think of it as 'Brecht with heart', kind of warm Brecht or 'Disco Brecht'. I think the thing about Disco Brecht is that it's about participating. You can't be passive. It's not to denigrate naturalistic film, I mean I love for example, *Traffic*, it's a great naturalistic film. It's a lot of devices though – like shaky cam, to give the impression that you're watching reportage about the drug problem. Now it's not real. What we do is reverse that and say that it's always a movie, very Brechtian as you say, and you must participate. So it's not about quietly sneaking up on you, it's about going bang! wake up wake up, get involved... And that form, it has some rules:

- 1 It tends to be based on a recognisable story shape. We looked to Greek myth for this. In the case of *Strictly Ballroom* it's David and Goliath, in *Moulin Rouge* it's the Orphean myth.
- 2 It's set in a heightened creative world, a world that you might think is funny and exotic like ballroom dancing but you kind of understand if it's a football club, or it's a political world that's universal. The president of the football club or President of the United States and the President of the Dance Federation all have the same vernacular, which is you know, "we've got a rebel out there who's speaking freedom through steps – we've gotta crush him!"
- 3 And thirdly and finally, I guess the best comparison is a sporting match. You go to watch soccer, you know the rules of the game, but you're nudging and winking at everyone and going yay! if you score. You have to keep the audience awake at all times, so you use device. And dancing was in *Strictly Ballroom*, in *Romeo and Juliet* it's language, they're always speaking in iambic, and in *Moulin Rouge* they sing.

So you know, it is a different kind of experience, more like playing an album or a record or something where you hear music. It's not about revealing plot. Most Naturalism usually buries plot and then

secretly sort of reveals it, whereas basically you know what the plot is at the beginning of the movie, you know the girl's gonna get with the boy and they're gonna win, but you go, how are they going to do it? It's the resonance of the way you tell it that becomes the kind of participating factor.

FII: You've talked about the heightened creative world of ballroom dancing in *Strictly Ballroom*, which is quite artificial, always interior, whereas Fran's world is exterior. Can you talk about that and the reasons for these choices?

BL: Well they're all thematic questions, again they're devices. Let's take your earlier statement, you're quite right, you come into the world and it's claustrophobic, very artificial, I mean their world is halls and funny dresses. When Scott and Fran first dance together... the moment she takes off her glasses we're suddenly shooting exterior, we're on a rooftop and the classic transformation moment, and they're dancing in front of a Coke sign, and we're wide, we're outside in the real world. So it makes the film breathe a little more... So that what Fran represents, what Fran brings to it is related to exteriors, wide shots, whereas the oppressive world is very artificial, controlled and enclosed.

FII: In the film the Anglo world is depicted as the oppressive world, but the Spanish world is shown as natural and passionate...

BL: Well, yes and no. (Fran's) Dad is a bit oppressive too, but you're quite right. What we're saying here is the Anglo world took the Paso Doble, which is a dance of expression, and put a whole lot of rules on it, and made it about winning. So the focus of it is to win a gold cup. Ultimately it has an economic tag to it, really. To win the cup you buy the lessons, you pay, take the cup, win the money. I mean that is what's going on there. Whereas in Fran's family, dancing is a tradition, it comes from life, it is an expression of life.

FII: Finally, *Strictly Ballroom* celebrates Australia's multicultural society. Ireland's population is becoming increasingly multicultural. What message can you offer an Irish audience on this issue?

BL: I mean I can only speak for Australia... it's one of the great, great things about Australia. I mean, we have the second

biggest Greek city in the world. Some of our greatest strengths come from that, there's no question. Apart from the fact that you can get a great coffee in Sydney you know, we're recognising that multicultural input is a great strength, and I absolutely believe that. We have to increase our population by allowing others to come. Absolutely, it's a strength, you know, it's a strength.

FII: Thanks very much indeed for your time.

BL: Not at all.

STUDENT EXPLORATIONS

- 1 Baz Luhrmann describes the making of *Strictly Ballroom* as a 'David & Goliath journey.' How is the theme of 'overcoming impossible odds' reflected in the filmmakers' struggle to make *Strictly Ballroom*?
- 2 The world of *Strictly Ballroom* is set firmly within Australia's 'urban, suburban culture,' which the film manages to send up as well as celebrate. Give examples of how *Strictly Ballroom* achieves this, referring to the film's cultural context/social setting. How did *Strictly Ballroom* influence subsequent Australian films in the 1990s, according to Baz Luhrmann?
- 3 What was Baz Luhrmann's original motivation for making *Strictly Ballroom*? What does he suggest to students who are interested in making films themselves? What do you think of his advice?
- 4 Describe the three main rules/conventions of red curtain cinema. What does Baz Luhrmann think are the main differences between what he calls 'natural cinema' and red curtain films? Give some examples of films from both categories. Which do you prefer watching? Why?
- 5 Explain what Baz Luhrmann means by red curtain cinema being 'audience participation cinema'. How does the audience 'participate' in watching the film? What 'devices' are used to remind the audience that they are watching a film?
- 6 What impressions do you receive of Baz Luhrmann from this interview? Comment on some of his views and whether you agree/disagree with him.

TRISTRAM MIALI INTERVIEW

FII: How did you become a producer? Can you tell us something about your career and the productions you have worked on before and since *Strictly Ballroom*?

TM: My career started in television, not features. I was a researcher in documentaries for the ABC¹ (the public broadcaster) – one of the great jobs in the industry. Then I started directing and producing documentaries. In time I became increasingly interested in telling stories that could better be told in a dramatised form. So it was a natural progression. I understood structure, and of course how films are made. I produced a mini-series for television; and not long after I set up the company with Ted Albert that made *Strictly Ballroom*. Ted had seen the stage play and suggested it might be something fun. And so it was.

FII: For students who may be interested in becoming producers themselves, what are the qualities that a successful producer must have? Can you offer any advice to aspiring film producers?

TM: First and foremost a producer brings his/her own gut instinct for a story that will appeal to an audience. Then you must understand the process. My personal feeling is that it helps enormously if you have made a film yourself. You need tenacity, salesmanship, and leadership. You need to be the calm in the eye of the storm. And you need a healthy bank balance and/or an understanding bank manager.

FII: Australia was in an economic recession in the early Nineties. What was it like trying to get funding for *Strictly Ballroom* at that time? What is the situation like now?

TM: There weren't that many features being made in the early nineties. We had enjoyed generous tax concessions in earlier years; but these had resulted in a spate of forgettable films (with some notable exceptions). The tax concessions were wound back; and it was hard. We had hoped to raise at least half the budget from private sources, but that was a disillusioning experience. The Film Finance Corporation were being very cautious about a first time feature producer, film director, and a largely unknown team. The budget was reduced by 35%, which was the level of risk they would take. Only one art-house

distributor² was prepared to commit to releasing the film, with a minimal P&A spend³ and no distribution guarantee! I don't think it is easier now. In fact I believe it is harder.

FII: *Strictly Ballroom* was made on a low budget and was hugely successful. How did it affect the Australian film industry? What opportunities exist for low budget filmmakers in Australia nowadays?

TM: *Strictly Ballroom* was a fairy story come true. It gave the industry a huge kick along. It launched Baz Luhrmann's feature film career. It gave the sales company, Beyond Films, a profile internationally. It brought profits and glory to its investors. And it made the government feel good about the support it gave the industry. And it made international distributors watch what was happening here. For a while. These days there are opportunities for low budget filmmakers. But mostly in short form drama. There are a number of competitions like Tropfest⁴ for short films. There is also more government funding for projects that bridge the gap between short films and features. It comes down to the passion and the commitment of the filmmaker.

FII: In the introduction to the *Strictly Ballroom* screenplay, you describe the initial visit to Cannes as unsuccessful. Why do you think it was so difficult to sell the humour and style of the film to overseas producers?

TM: The first visit to Cannes with Baz was unsuccessful, but it taught us a lot. Distributors in Cannes are there to either look at completed films, or sell their own films (sometimes still in post-production). They are not interested in scripts. Financing deals can happen, usually between established parties with big names attached. But of course no one knew us from a bar of soap. Plus there was the inevitable reaction to a story set in this kitsch world of ballroom dancing. We had prepared a glossy document, which featured colour photographs of ballroom champions and their world. It also included at the end cartoon scenes from the script. Baz is a wonderful storyteller and had been a ballroom dancer in his childhood. If anyone could have sold the concept, he could.

FII: Baz Luhrmann has described the

making of *Strictly Ballroom* as a 'David and Goliath' journey. What were the main difficulties from the producer's point of view?

TM: No one wanted to know about our orphan project except us. Which made us that much more determined. Ted Albert, my partner, died most suddenly of a heart attack just when we had got the script there and were gearing up to raise the finance. The Australian Securities Commission who issue the guidelines under which a prospectus⁵ can be issued and raise private investment, changed all their rules – and then didn't issue new ones for some months, effectively cutting off this source of finance.

Paul Mercurio twisted his ankle three days before we started filming. The big end scene was scheduled during the lunch break of a real competition a couple of days later. We couldn't change it. He had to be able to do it, swollen ankle or not! We never had enough money; and the contingency was blown before we got into post-production. The major investor, the Film Finance Corporation saw a rough-cut⁶ of most of the film because we needed extra money from them for music. They hated what they saw and did their best to frustrate us from then on. But the other side of the coin is that a few key people responded to our vision, passion, whatever – and helped us no end.

FII: *Strictly Ballroom* is on the school curriculum in Australia, and is also one of the prescribed film texts in the Leaving Cert here in Ireland. What makes it such a popular choice for study, do you think?

TM: It's a classic myth set in an unlikely, but visually romantic context. Moreover, for young people it's about empowering the young and talented and oppressed. The metaphor is clearly recognisable across all cultures. I also think everyone feels there's a bit of the Fran in them. That they are just waiting for the right opportunity to turn into a swan.

FII: *Strictly Ballroom* celebrates Australia's multicultural society with the uniting of the Anglo and Spanish communities at the end. Can you suggest some other Australian films that reflect Australia's cultural diversity?

TM: There would be quite a few, and I am sure that I will now forget some important

ones, but here goes. *Looking For Alibrandi*, which won the AFI⁷ award for Best Film a couple of years ago, is set in the Italian migrant community. (And I am currently financing another Italian migrant story called *Firehead*.) *Wog Boy*; *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* celebrates a different sort of cultural diversity. *The Rabbit Proof Fence* is an Aboriginal story; *Floating Life*; *Beneath Clouds*; *Australian Rules*; *La Spagnola*.⁸

FII: Films like *The Quiet Man* and *Far and Away* use familiar stereotypes in their representations of the Irish. Do you think any comparisons can be drawn between the Australian and Irish film industries and the way their cultural identities are represented in films internationally?

TM: For every instance of cultural stereotyping, there are many more that reflect cultural complexity and individuality. For every *Crocodile Dundee* there is a *Mad Max* or a *Gallipoli*.

FII: With some notable exceptions (eg. *My Left Foot*, *The Commitments*, *Michael Collins*), Irish audiences are reluctant or do not have many opportunities to go and see Irish films at the cinema. Most box office successes are Hollywood films. Do Australian audiences enjoy seeing Australian films?

TM: Australian audiences very much enjoy seeing their own films, but are probably no better than Irish ones at doing so. The reasons are familiar ones. Firstly we make far fewer films than Hollywood, so on the law of averages... Secondly our budgets are smaller; and there are certain types of film we don't bother with – because the Americans make them better. These are mainstream youth market films. What is absolutely clear is that when we make a truly great film everyone wants to go and see it. Our critics tend to be kinder on local films than ones from overseas, particularly America. You can argue the merits or otherwise of that; but there is a desire to be supportive when it is warranted.

At the end of the day, the world is shrinking. Peter Weir and Russell Crowe are currently shooting a \$100m feature for Fox in Mexico. It's an adaptation of a Patrick O'Brian novel (18th Century sea-faring), with a screenplay by an English writer living in Sydney. What more can I say?

STUDENT EXPLORATIONS

- 1 The main role of a producer is to raise finance and see through the production from beginning to end. According to Tristram Miall, what are the qualities that a film producer needs to be successful? Do you agree?
- 2 Despite various difficulties the filmmakers managed to get *Strictly Ballroom* made. After its release, Tristram Miall says its success was like a 'fairy story come true.' What was the film's impact on the Australian film industry?
- 3 Tristram Miall says that *Strictly Ballroom* remains popular because it is about 'empowering the young and talented and oppressed.' Do you agree? Why do you think the film has such universal appeal?
- 4 Some Australian films use familiar stereotypes, but Tristram Miall cites several examples of films that reflect Australia's diversity. View one of these films and discuss its themes/plot/characters, showing how the film offers more than stereotypical representations of Australia.
- 5 Why do you think Australian film critics are 'kinder' to Australian film releases? Is this fair, do you think? Do Irish critics adopt a similar approach to Irish-made films?

1 Australian Broadcasting Corporation

2 Film distributors are companies that acquire the rights to films for distribution at cinemas

3 Publicity and Advertising budget

4 Tropfest is a Sydney-based short film festival

5 A prospectus is prepared by a company when raising finance. It sells the idea to potential investors, so that they will invest in the project, and usually provides details on past performance and the kind of return investors can expect.

6 A rough cut is the first draft of a film

7 Australian Film Institute

8 For details check out the internet movie database www.imdb.com

SEQUENCES FOR STUDY

1 The Southern District Waratah Championships

- Red curtain opening, with music from Strauss' *Blue Danube*
- Shirley Hastings speaks to camera in 'mockumentary' style
- Flashback to the dancers at the Waratah Championships
- Scott and Liz are shown being 'boxed in'
- Scott dances his own 'crowd pleasing steps' in response
- Barry Fife, shown at his desk, gives his opinion
- The winners are announced, and Scott and Liz have lost

2 New Partners – Kendall's Dance Studio

- Liz is furious with Scott and refuses to be his partner
- Scott asks Wayne his opinion of the steps, but Wayne says he doesn't know
- Les tries to persuade Scott not to dance his own steps
- After Pam Short's unexpected accident Ken asks Liz to be his new partner
- Doug secretly watches film footage of Scott dancing his new steps
- Scott dances alone in the studio
- Fran approaches Scott and asks to be his new partner: he accepts after she calls him 'a gutless wonder'

3 The Try-Outs

- Les Kendall and Shirley Hastings hold try-outs to find Scott a new partner
- Fran and Scott practice together in secret
- Doug dances alone at the Dance studio
- Fran and Scott dance together on the rooftop
- At the Hastings' house Shirley expresses her frustration at Scott's lack of a suitable partner
- Fran and Scott continue practising, dancing to the song *Time after Time*
- Scott walks Fran home. Rico, Fran's father seems angry with Fran. Ya Ya watches from the window

4 The State Championships

- Shirley Hastings tells Fran that Tina Sparkle will be Scott's new partner. Fran runs off, upset. Scott chases Fran and everyone else chases Scott
- Scott finds Fran and dances backstage with her, to the song 'Perhaps'
- Liz arrives and breaks the spell, telling Fran she's just a beginner. Fran trips over, suddenly self-conscious

- Shirley, Vanessa, Liz all persuade Fran to go home and not 'spoil things for Scott'
- Tina Sparkle is introduced to Scott as her new partner, but Scott tells her he's not available
- Scott goes after Fran, knocking over Barry Fife's video display stand as he leaves

5 Paso Doble – Fran's House

- Scott follows Fran home and meets a suspicious Rico
- Ya Ya invites Scott and Fran to show them how they can dance
- Everyone laughs at Scott and Fran's ballroom dancing version of the Paso Doble
- Rico and Ya Ya dance the Paso Doble their way, and teach Scott how to listen to the rhythm
- Scott goes home and tells Shirley that he is going to dance with Fran. Shirley reacts angrily and slaps him

6 Practising for the Pan-Pacifics

- Rico and Ya Ya help Scott and Fran prepare for the Pan-Pacifics
- New steps are rumoured, but Barry denies it: "There are no new steps!"
- Rico tells Scott and Fran they are ready for the Pan-Pacifics
- Scott and Fran exchange a kiss
- Back at the Dance Studio, Barry tells Scott that Doug ruined his own dancing career because of his crazy new steps
- Flashback to the past and Barry's version of Doug's downfall
- Scott needs proof, so he opens Doug's locker and discovers the photo

7 The Pan Pacific Grand Prix Dance Championships

- Scott is dancing with Liz because he believes Barry Fife's story
- Fran competes in the Beginners' Final - without Scott
- Doug eventually catches up with Scott, and reveals the truth about what happened in 1967 - Shirley dumped him to dance with Les instead
- Doug explains: "We lived our lives in fear!" and Scott leaves Liz onstage as he runs after Fran

8 Scott & Fran's Big Moment

- Scott catches up with Fran and she agrees to dance with him
- Wayne and Vanessa overhear Barry

- telling a drunken Ken Railings and Tina Sparkle that the competition has been fixed in their favour
- Wayne and Vanessa tell Les, and he confronts Barry
- Scott dances with Fran and the audience loves them
- Charm Leachman cuts the music and Barry tries to disqualify Fran and Scott
- Doug starts to clap. Then Rico and Ya Ya join in and soon the whole audience is applauding
- Liz reconnects the power supply
- Fran and Scott's dance ends, to massive cheering from the crowd.
- Barry falls and knocks over the display of trophies
- Everyone joins in the dance finale together to the song *Love is in the Air*

KEY MOMENTS

Key Moment/Mode(s) of Comparison	Film Language (mise en scène - camera-work, costume, props, lighting characters' actions/expressions. Also editing, music/sound effects)	What does the scene convey to the audience?
Sequence 1 Waratah Championships Shirley speaks to camera about the tragedy of Scott's new steps <i>Cultural context</i> <i>Hero/Heroine/Villain</i>	This part of the opening sequence is in 'mockumentary' style as Shirley is framed in medium shot with Doug and speaks to camera about the 'tragedy' of Scott's steps. Realistic lighting provides contrast to dance hall. Captions identify the characters. Tacky décor of Hastings family home shown, pastel colours, trophies, Framed photos of Scott/Liz everywhere.	Reveals Shirley's ambitions for Scott to become a champion. Competitive world of ballroom dancing is hugely important to her. Relationship between Doug/ Shirley shown as unequal, as she does all the talking and he says nothing.
Sequence 2 New Partners Scott dances his own steps in the Dance Studio <i>Hero</i> <i>Cultural context/social setting</i>	Long shot of Scott, who moves into a spotlight in the centre of the dance floor and begins to dance his own steps. Low angle close-ups of Scott's feet. Scott is wearing plain white top/black trousers, not the glitzy costumes of ballroom dancing. Camera stays with Scott throughout dance sequence.	Scott is positioned as the hero in this scene. The camera focuses on him throughout. He is shown here dancing his own steps revealing his creative side, and providing a contrast between this and the artificiality of the ballroom dancing world.
Sequence 1 Waratah Championships Barry Fife's office <i>Theme: Power/Corruption</i> <i>Hero/Villain</i>	Darkened office, mockumentary style, Federation President Barry Fife is sitting behind a desk, emphasising his position of power. As he speaks to camera, his voice echoes, sounds threatening: "You can dance any steps you like, but that doesn't mean you'll...win." Zoom into close-up of his mouth when he says the word "win".	Barry Fife is represented as a villain. The use of shadow/darkened lighting emphasises this, implying that he is untrustworthy. His echoing words reveal that he decides who wins and that the Dance Federation, led by him is corrupt.
Sequence 4 State Championships Shirley, Liz and Vanessa persuade Fran to go home <i>Hero/heroine/villain</i>	Low angle close-up shots from Fran's point of view looking up at Shirley, Liz & Vanessa emphasises their domination and Fran's isolation and vulnerability.	Fran is represented here as a victim of bullying and we are invited to sympathise with her. Shirley, Liz & Vanessa have ganged up on Fran and are portrayed as villains, particularly Shirley.
Sequence 5 Paso Doble Rico challenges Scott and shows him how to dance the Paso Doble <i>Cultural context/ social setting</i> <i>- Spanish culture vs Anglo-Australian</i>	Scene takes place on the porch outside Fran's house, which is in a rundown, marginal area near railroad tracks. Natural, exterior night setting. Guitar music contrasts with taped music at dance hall. Close-up shots of Rico's feet during Paso Doble, rhythm of feet tapping is heard throughout the scene. Spanish dialogue emphasises Scott's outsider status in Fran's world.	Fran's family are depicted as outsiders, marginal to mainstream Australian society. They are represented as more natural, authentic than the winning-obsessed Anglo-Australians. Dance is 'from the heart.' Exterior setting reinforces contrast with interior world of ballroom dancing.

STUDENT ACTIVITY: (GROUP/INDIVIDUAL)

Create another list of key moments from the film that highlight other modes of comparison. Using film language, explain what each key moment conveys to the audience, and how they illustrate the mode(s) of comparison.

Present your findings to the class, and compare/contrast with other comparative texts on your course.

FILM LANGUAGE

Art Director: The designer in charge of sets and costumes

Camera Position: The position from which a camera is pointed at the subject

- **High Angle Shot:** The camera points down towards the character, making the subject look vulnerable

- **Low Angle Shot:** This shot is taken from below with the camera pointing up towards the character, making him/her look bigger and more powerful, for example Barry Fife on stage (Sequence 1: The Waratah Championships)

- **Aerial Shot:** A shot taken from a plane, crane or helicopter, for example when Scott and Fran are dancing on the roof (Sequence 3: The Try-Outs)

- **Long Shot:** A long shot includes at least the full figures of the subjects, usually more

- **Establishing Shot:** Usually a long shot, it shows the audience the location of the scene and provides information about characters

- **Medium Shot:** A shot showing character/subject from the knees up, for example when Shirley speaks to camera about Scott's steps (Sequence 1: Waratah Championships)

- **Close-Up:** When the camera is very close to a subject to show more detail or the expression on a character's face

- **Point-of-View Shot:** A shot that shows the action from a character's point of view, for example when Doug reveals the truth (Sequence 7: The Pan-Pacifics) the camera shots are from Scott's point-of-view as he looks around him before jumping off the stage

- **Panning Shot:** The camera moves from left to right

- **Tracking Shot:** Any shot in which the camera moves from one point to another, sideways or in or out, for example when Scott slides along the dance floor at the Pan-Pacifics (Sequence 8: Scott and Fran's Big Moment)

- **Zoom:** The lens of the camera is adjusted so that the subject is brought much closer to camera, for example in Barry Fife's office (Sequence 1: Waratah Championships) the camera zooms into a close-up of his mouth

Cinematographer/Director of

Photography: Responsible for the camera, lighting and the visual mood of the film

Continuity: The person responsible for ensuring that details in one shot will match details in subsequent shots

Cross-Cutting: This involves intermingling the shots of two or more scenes to suggest parallel action, for example after Scott catches up with Fran the film then cuts to Wayne and Vanessa who overhear Barry Fife's plan (Sequence 7: The Pan-Pacifics)

Director: The director organises the efforts of all the artistic/technical people involved in the production and gives the finished film its shape, tone and visual signature

Dissolve: A slower, more atmospheric means of transition from scene to scene, often implying the passage of time. The end of one scene fades out, while the beginning of the next fades up

Editor: The editor organises the narrative structure of the film by putting all the different shots together after the film has been shot

Final Cut: The complete film on its release

Flashback: A scene or a sequence that is inserted into a scene in present time and deals with the past, for example when Shirley speaks to camera about Scott's steps, the film cuts to a flashback of the Waratah Championships (Sequence 1)

Freeze-Frame: A freeze shot, which is achieved by printing a single frame many times in succession to give the illusion of a still photograph

Genre: A particular narrative form or type of film. There are several recognisable film genres including the Western, Detective Story, Romantic Comedy, Documentary, Horror, Musical. Baz Luhrmann describes his trilogy of films as examples of red curtain cinema, a new cinema form/genre

Lighting: The process and technology of illuminating sets and action in the shooting of a film

Mise en Scène: A French theatrical term, which literally means 'putting in the scene', and refers to camerawork, the actors' movements/ expressions, costumes, props, framing and lighting

Montage: a) A short sequence of rapidly cut or dissolved shots that tell a story economically, or show the passage of hours, days, months or years, as in Sequence 3: The Try-Outs

Or b) any sequence that joins together distinct images rather than following dramatic action

Narrative/Plot: The story

Out-Take: A shot/scene that is not included in the final cut of the film

Pace: The speed or rhythm of a film, for example editing, music, dialogue all contribute to the film's overall pace

Producer: The role of the producer is to raise finance for the film and organise all aspects of the production from start to finish

Reaction Shot: When the camera cuts away from the main scene or speaker in order to show another character's reaction

Rough-Cut: The first draft of a film

Scene: A series of shots or a single shot that takes place in a single location and deals with a single action

Score: The music for a film

Screenplay: The script of a film

Sequence: A series of scenes that make up a complete section of the film's story

Shot: A single piece of film, however long or short without cuts, exposed continuously

Shot-Reverse-Shot: When the camera cuts from one character to another during a conversation or exchange of looks

Slow-Motion: This effect is achieved by filming action at speeds faster than the normal 24 frames per second, and then projecting them at normal speed. Slow-motion has been described as a 'close-up in time' as it nearly always has the effect of making the scene seem more 'lyrical,' for example the silhouetted dancers in the opening moments of the film (Sequence 1: Waratah Championships)

Sound: Diabetic sound is part of the action; non-diabetic sound includes music/sound effects imposed on the action

Voiceover: Spoken description or analysis of action on the soundtrack of the film, for example Barry Fife's version of the truth about the 1967 Championships, as told to Scott (Sequence 6: Practising for the Pan-Pacifics)

FILMOGRAPHY

RECOMMENDED AUSTRALIAN FILMS

Walkabout (1970). Nicolas Roeg's film tells the story of a teenage girl (Jenny Agutter) and her younger brother who are abandoned in the outback by their father. Their survival depends on an aboriginal boy who befriends them and helps them find their way home.

Picnic at Hanging Rock (1978). A haunting and atmospheric drama set in Victoria in 1900, when schoolgirls disappear mysteriously during an afternoon picnic.

The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith (1978). Directed by Fred Schepisi this is a violent and uncompromising drama about the conflict between Aboriginal and settler.

My Brilliant Career (1979). Gillian Armstrong's first feature stars Judy Davis and Sam Neill, and is based on Miles Franklin's novel about a woman's aspirations to be a writer.

Gallipoli (1980). Directed by Peter Weir and starring Mel Gibson, the film provides an Australian perspective on the disastrous Gallipoli operation of April 1915 during the First World War.

George Miller's *Mad Max* (1979), * a futuristic action thriller starring Mel Gibson, was hugely successful in Australia and overseas. Sequels *Mad Max II* (1981) * and *Mad Max: Beyond Thunderdome* (1985) * were also box office hits.

The Year My Voice Broke (1987) and *Flirting* (1991) directed by John Duigan are both 'rites of passage' films about a young teenager Danny (Noah Taylor) growing up in Australia in the 1960s.

Romper Stomper (1992) was released the same year as *Strictly Ballroom* * but provides a harsh and violent view of society, in stark contrast to *Strictly's* optimism. Set in suburban Melbourne Russell Crowe plays Hando, the leader of a racist skinhead gang.

The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert (1993) * and *Muriel's Wedding* (1994) * have been described as 'kitsch comedies', and have similarities to *Strictly Ballroom*. All three films share an

emphasis on musical performance, colourful costumes and over the top characters. Priscilla tells the story of a trio of drag queens who travel across the Australian desert in a pink bus. In *Muriel's Wedding*, lonely Muriel (Toni Collette) escapes from the boring coastal town of Porpoise Spit, and moves to Sydney where she changes her name to Mariel and dreams of having the perfect wedding.

Two documentary films, *Cinema of Unease: A Personal Journey* by Sam Neill, and *40,000 Years of Dreaming: A Century of Australian Cinema* are included on the following VHS; *The Century of Cinema: New Zealand & Australia* (1996). * Each offers a personal view of the New Zealand and Australian film cultures, and there are several interesting film clips.

Two Hands (1997) is a crime comedy caper set in Sydney starring Bryan Brown as a gangland boss who sends a young surfer (Heath Ledger) to deliver cash to an address in Bondi. But when Ledger loses the money at the beach, the gang is furious and seeks revenge.

The Castle (1997) * A low budget hit in Australia and overseas, this affectionate comedy tells the story of a quirky Aussie family who fight to defend their home from developers.

The Dish (2000). * Made by the same team who produced *The Castle*, this gentle comedy is set in July 1969 in a small rural town in New South Wales. Actors Sam Neill, Kevin Harrington and Tom Long play Australian scientists who become unlikely heroes because of the part they play in broadcasting the first TV pictures of the Apollo moon landing.

Looking For Alibrandi (2000) is a coming of age story, adapted from the novel by Melina Marchetta. Set in Sydney's Italian migrant community Josie is a teenager who lives with her mother (Gretta Scacchi). When she meets her father (Anthony LaPaglia) she discovers family secrets that solve the mystery of her past.

Rabbit Proof Fence (2002) explores a significant and tragic part of Australian history: 'The Stolen Generations,' when Aboriginal children were forcibly removed

from their families and placed in institutions. Set in the 1930s and starring Kenneth Branagh, the film tells the story of Aboriginal girls who escape from the religious institution they have been placed in and try to find their way home.

* Available from Irish Film Centre Bookshop. To order VHS/DVDs contact: IFC Bookshop on (01) 679 5744

The above films may be also available to rent from good video/DVD rental outlets. It is also worth checking the internet if you are interested in buying VHS/DVDs online.

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'Picnic of Hanging Rock' image courtesy of producer Jim McElroy

'The Dish' image courtesy of Eclipse Pictures



