



Alexandra's Project

A Film by Rolf de Heer



Australia, Running Time: 103 minutes

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SYNOPSIS

Steve (Gary Sweet) is a middle-management office worker happily going through the motions of family life as husband to wife Alexandra (Helen Buday) and father to their two children. On his birthday, he receives a much sought after promotion. With good news to share at home, Steve leaves work and heads home, in anticipation of a surprise party he suspects Alexandra has organized.

But when he returns home, all is quite in their suburban townhouse. After searching the darkened house for party guests Steve finds nothing except a video tape labeled "Play Me." It is a recording made by Alexandra and their children wishing him a happy birthday. Once the children leave the screen, Alexandra begins to give Steve the most surprising present of all...an alluring striptease. He thinks all his birthdays have come at once...until, on the video, he sees a gun pointed at Alexandra's head.

In a panic, he races for the phone but discovers there's no connection. He tries to leave the townhouse only to find that his keys no longer fit the locks and the security shutters on the windows are locked tight. Remembering his mobile phone, Steve finds that his battery has been replaced by a bullet. Alone, frightened and imprisoned in his own house, Steve has no choice but to watch the rest of the video tape.

ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

After trekking through the tropical jungle of French Guyana to film *The Old Man Who Read Love Stories*, then through the rugged Australian outback to make the highly acclaimed *The Tracker*, Rolf de Heer returned to the studio to make *Alexandra's Project*- a film about marriage, sex and deception. The film was selected for Official Competition at the 2003 Berlin Film Festival even before delivery.

The genesis of the idea behind *Alexandra's Project* was some four years earlier for de Heer. "I got an image that set off a train of thought on how I could make a micro-budget feature for maybe \$150,000 or \$200,000. That central image was a woman talking to a video camera by herself in her own house. It sat in my head for some years and after *The Tracker*, much more intensely. So I began jotting down little notes about what I could do with it to make it dramatic and cinematic on that limited budget."

Although *Alexandra's Project* initially began life as a micro-budget production, funding for the film was reconsidered when Domenico Procacci, Rolf's long-term collaborator and producer, visited him for Christmas in 2002 to discuss setting up the Australian arm of his Italian production company Fandango, to be headed by Sue Murray.

"I initially came out to Australia to tell Rolf to slow down because Fandango had to distribute his film *The Tracker* and one of my concerns as his producer is always that Rolf does too much," Procacci said.

De Heer remembers seeing Procacci on Christmas Day and talking to him about what he had written so far. “Domenico became quite enthusiastic and I said that there was time to shoot this film immediately after the Adelaide Festival of Arts. Also I explained to him that in terms of how I was feeling, right now was the time to make this film, otherwise I may never end up doing it,” de Heer said.

Procacci immediately decided that *Alexandra’s Project* was the ideal film to launch Fandango Australia. “It’s a great story, but it is also shocking and confronting. I changed my mind and understood that Rolf needed to make this film now,” he said. “For me, when I commit to any project, it is always a matter of trust. I trust Rolf and every time we make a film, I have reason to trust him more and more.”

It was when Procacci and de Heer began to talk seriously about the budget for *Alexandra’s Project* that things got bigger. “It started becoming a real film instead of this odd little micro project,” said de Heer. “We made a decision that shooting the film in a studio had value and so we set out budget then and there on Christmas Day.”

Once Procacci had greenlit the project, de Heer began discussing the film with his Australian producer, Julie Ryan. “We were meant to be on holidays when Rolf rang me on Boxing Day, telling me that we were going into pre-production in January,” Ryan recalled. “I guess I should never be surprised at what Rolf wants to do next, but once I read the scripts I realized that it was an extremely powerful story. I also understood that it had to be made immediately in order for Rolf to fully realize his vision.”

“My favorite part of working with Rolf is when he delivers me his latest script,” says Ryan. “Not just because his stories are unique, but because they always pose new challenges for me as a producer, as to how we are going to execute the film.”

From the outset, de Heer knew that *Alexandra’s Project* was going to be an intense, emotionally challenging experience for all involved, particularly the two leads. It was during post-production on the *Tracker* that de Heer began writing the role of Alexandra’s husband, Steve, with Gary Sweet in mind. “Gary had been such a pleasure to work with on *The Tracker*, but I knew this part was going to be quite difficult,” de Heer said. “So I rang him up and said ‘Gary, if I write this part for you, I have to warn you it’s not going to be an easy part to play, it’s not going to be like anything else you’ve played before.’ And Gary, in his inimitable style, simply said ‘Go for your life, mate.’ So I did.”

“There’s something about Gary’s public image, and the private baggage he carries with him as an actor that was right for this role,” noted de Heer. “He has this public persona, being many times married and always in the gossip columns, that for me worked very much for the role of Steve.”

Gary remembers de Heer’s offer fondly. “Being in *The Tracker* was a wonderful experience for me as an actor and cemented in my mind that fact that I want to be involved in anything to do with Rolf because he is such an intelligent, sensitive and funny bloke,” he said. “And he’s not too bad a director either,” Sweet joked.

Although he began writing *Alexandra's Project* specifically for Gary Sweet, de Heer didn't yet have anyone in mind for the character of Alexandra, and it would be quite difficult to cast the right actress for the role. De Heer knew he had to find someone of exceptional range, talent and courage to realize this complex and explicit female role.

"Once the script was written, it went out to a number of talented women whom I was interested in and whom I thought could play the part. There was a tremendous amount of anguish, I think, from two or three of the actresses who ultimately refused it. Although they all wanted very much to do it on some level because it was a very interesting and challenging role, on other levels they felt they weren't right. Or they felt they couldn't do it for personal reason, because it may upset their children or issues like that," de Heer said.

Prior to the launch of *The Tracker* at the Adelaide Festival of Arts in February 2002, de Heer and Ryan went into pre-production, even though the central role of Alexandra had yet to be cast. They decided to engage Faith Martin, a casting director in Sydney, to help find the right actress.

"Faith lined up a series of very interesting people for me to look at in Sydney and Melbourne," said de Heer. "Coincidentally, Gary happened to be in Sydney at the same time, so he came along to some of the casting sessions with me. In the end we both agreed that Helen Buday was the one actress most likely to have the range to play his wife, Helen has this mysterious, hidden intensity, and brought an emotional depth to the part that was exactly what I was looking for in the character of Alexandra," he said.

Helen Buday jumped at the chance to act for de Heer again, having previously worked with him on *Dingo* in 1990. "Filming *Dingo* was a wonderful and experience, and although I've done more theater than film, I find Rolf an absolute delight to work with as a director," Buday said. "He allows 'you.' Allows what you can bring to the role and makes room for it within the performance, and that is quite a rare thing for an actor. You get something that he's not expecting, that you're not expecting, and you invent the process together."

"I just launched into this 'project,' Buday punned. "It's such an unprecedented film, there's nothing I've ever seen or been in that's like it."

With the two leads secure, only the role of Bill, Steve and Alexandra's security conscious neighbor, remained to be filled. It seemed to de Heer that the character of Bill needed to be worldlier than Steve and culturally opposed to his suburban existence. "I had in mind someone of foreign extraction but I wasn't sure whether they were Turkish or Greek or Bulgarian or whatever," said de Heer. "I just knew they had to be quite different to Steve and his experience of life and marriage."

De Heer recalled an actor who he had seen in an experimental theater piece in Sydney some twenty years earlier, whom he thought might work for the part. "I remember once

seeing this very interesting Polish actor named Bogdan Koca in a play when I lived in Sydney. He was very good in what was quite an obscure role and I liked him a lot,” de Heer recalls. “So when I was in Sydney casting Helen, I arranged to meet Bogdan. Even though it was twenty years later, he still struck me as being wonderfully interesting, so I looked no further.”

Like Buday, Koca was immediately excited about the possibility of working with de Heer. “When Rolf asked me if I was interested in playing the part of Bill, I think I said something like ‘I don’t even want to read the script. I just want to work with you. If you want to film the Yellow Pages, I’ll do that with you because I’m interested in your creative approach to filmmaking,’” recalled Koca.

Compared to roles of Steve and Alexandra, Bill might seem like a very small part for an actor, however Koca realized that he was an accessory for the entire drama. “I think Bill is quite an extraordinary character,” he said. “What is interesting about this film to me is how Bill’s life acts as a parallel to the emotional life of Steve, the male victim of the story, a mirror for his own life, if you like. It was quite challenging for me as an actor, that in a couple of lines, a couple of little scenes, I had to try and tell the deep story of this man.”

As most of the film’s drama takes place in Steve and Alexandra’s townhouse, a decision was made to build a split level set at the South Australian Film Corporation studios to allow de Heer more creative options during production.

Alexandra’s Project reunited de Heer with long term collaborators James Currie (sound), Beverly Freeman (hair, makeup and wardrobe), Tania Nehme (film editor) and Graham Tradif (music). De Heer also worked with Ian Jones (director of photography), who had previously shot *The Tracker* and was supervising DOP on *Bad Boy Bubby*.

Because the majority of the film is set in the confined space of the townhouse, de Heer and Jones decided to maximize camera movement. “It’s to do with the nature of the genre I guess,” said de Heer. “With something like this that has obvious thriller elements, an audience expects the camera to move. At the same time the film has five-minute takes where the camera doesn’t move an inch, complete focused on Helen’s face on a television screen.”

The dramatic turning point in the film comes when Gary’s Steve discovers the videotape that his wife has left him for his birthday. “Rolf wanted Steve and Alexandra to be engaged in dialogue even though Steve was only watching her on television,” said Sweet. “He wanted it to be two people responding to each other emotionally rather than simply one character watching a video recording of another.”

De Heer encouraged Buday to rehearse with a video camera at home on her own, which helped her find the liberation of her within her character. De Heer and Sweet also decided not to have Sweet see Buday’s video footage until the film camera rolled. This

enabled Sweet to respond freshly and honestly to the footage, letting his performance evolve naturally.

While *Alexandra's Project* can be seen as a psychological thriller, it also concerns itself with the nature of the human condition, in particular the way that people relate to each other. "I think it's basically about discovering that the person you think you have known for all these years is not the person you thought you knew," Sweet said. "I think audiences will be polarized and I think that is the brilliance of Rolf's script. The ambiguity it generates between the sexes is unique."

As writer, director and producer of the film, de Heer offers his final comment on how he views *Alexandra's Project*. "I guess it's about the politics of marriage really, the politics of relationships. It's about people living in different realities, in this case people in a marriage, living in two different realities. At the end of the day, just try and experience it in terms of its emotion. I hope the audience will too."

CAST

Steve	Gary Sweet
Alexandra	Helen Buday
Bill	Bogdan Koca

CREW

Writer/Director/Producer	Rolf de Heer
Producer	Julie Ryan
Producer	Domenico Procacci
Executive Producer	Antonio Zeccola
Co-Producer	Sue Murray
Co-Producer	Bryce Menzies
Director of Photography	Ian Jones, ACS
Film Editor	Tania Nehme
Composer	Graham Tardif
Sound Design	James Currie, Andre Plain, Nada Mikas
Hair/Makeup/Wardrobe	Beverly Freeman
Associate Producer	Nile Erik Neilsen

ABOUT THE CAST

Gary Sweet (Steve)

Originally from Adelaide, Gary Sweet attended Flinders University where he studied teaching. After graduating he won a small part in the classic Australian series THE SULLIVANS. He stayed with the drama for two years. Sweet earned critical respect for his portrayal of Donald Bradman in BODYLINE and the award-winning role of "Mickey" in the long running ABC television drama series POLICE RESCUE. Since then, Sweet has worked on many successful Australian television productions including STINGERS, WILDSIDE, BIG SKY, CODY, THE FLYING DOCTORS and A COUNTRY PRACTICE. His film credits include LOVE IN AMBUSH, WHAT THE MOON SAW, INDECENT OBSESSION, THE DREAMING, FEVER, THE LIGHTHORSEMEN and NIGHTMARES.

Sweet also won the People's Choice Award for Most Popular Movie Star, Most Popular Male Television Star and Most Popular Movie in 1994.

Helen Buday (Alexandra)

Since graduating from the National Institute for Dramatic Art in 1983, Helen Buday has become one of Australia's most versatile and respected theater actors. She has performed with most of Australia's leading theater companies in productions as varied as A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM, THE THREE SISTERS, THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST and THE DOLL'S HOUSE. An accomplished singer, she has also played the lead roles in MY FAIR LADY, CABARET, HIGH SOCIETY and THE THREEPENNY OPERA. Buday made her screen debut as Savanna Nix, leader of the feral children in MAD MAX II: BEYOND THUNDERDOME.

Besides her regular theater work, Buday has also appeared in various Australian television series including LAND OF HOPE, SECRETS, WATER RATS and STINGERS.

Bogdan Koca (Bill)

Actor, director, writer, composer and designer, Bogdan Koca graduated from the Academy of Theatrical Arts in Warsaw in 1975 before becoming one of Poland's most popular actors. Since arriving in Australia in 1982, Koca has directed many celebrated stage productions including Shakespeare's HAMELT and Gombrowicz's THE MARRIAGE and Jean Genet's SPLENDID'S. As a playwright his work includes PRELUDE TO JOYCE'S ARTIST, NORTHWEST OF CUSCO and THE PORT. His play MY NAME IS SUCH AND SUCH received the Sydney Critic's Circle Award in 1993 and was nominated for the Green Room Award in Melbourne in 1994. In 1997 Koca founded the Sydney Art Theater and as its Artistic Director has directed and designed numerous productions including UNDER MILK WOOD, ANTIGONE, MACBETH and DEATH IN VENICE.

Most recently Koca appeared as Solyony in THREE SISTERS for the Sydney Theater Company and as Professor Kurman in BIOGRAPHY: A GAME for the Sydney Art Theater.

ABOUT THE CREW

Rolf de Heer (Writer/Director/Producer)

Born in Heemskerk, Holland, Rold de Heer migrated to Australia with his family. From eighteen, he spend seven years working at the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, until he decided it was time “to stop dealing with other people’s programs and make some of my own.” In 1977 he was granted entry to Australia’s prestigious Film Television and Radio School, completing the three-year course with diplomas in production and directing. Having written, directed and produced feature films for nearly two decades, de Heer has become one of Australia’s leading filmmakers. His work consistently challenge moral conventions and push the boundaries of the filmmaker’s art.

De Heer is currently in production on his eleventh feature film TEN CANOES. The film is being made with the community of Ramingining, on the Arafura Swamp in remote Arnhem Land, and will be co-directed by leading Indigenous film actor, David Gulpilil.

FESTIVAL AWARDS & HISTORY

Official Selection in Competition:

Berlin Film Festival, 2003

Buenos Aires Film Festival, 2003

Puchon Film Festival, 2003

Motovun Film Festival, Croatia, 2003

German Fantasy Film Festival, 2003

Edinburgh International Film Festival, 2003

Telluride Film Festival, 2003

Montreal World Film Festival, 2003 winning Golden Zenith for Best Film from Oceania

Toronto Film Festival, 2003

Winner: Film Critics Circle of Australia award for Best Original Screenplay

ABOUT FILM MOVEMENT

Film Movement is an innovative new film distribution company, created as a solution for millions of consumers across the nation whose access to outstanding film is limited by geography, lifestyle or lack of information. Film Movement has members in over 50 states and 1200 cities. Film Movement acquires award winning independent films from

the world's top festivals, which they then release each month of the year to members on DVD through a subscription service, and theatrically through The Film Movement Series. Participating filmmakers are able to reach under-served film fans everywhere through Film Movement.

The Film Movement Series is a new theatrical film series featuring some of the best in original world cinema. Created by the team that invented the groundbreaking Shooting Gallery Film Series, Film Movement will release 6 of its 12 films per year in leading independent cinemas in major US cities to help outstanding filmmakers find the audience they deserve. All films are available to members exclusively on DVD upon theatrical release so that they may participate regardless of where they live.

Film Movement has partnered with some of the leading independent theaters in the country to exhibit the Film Movement Series. The schedule includes the following films:

- Wiebke von Carolsfeld's *Marion Bridge*
- Eric Eason's *Manito*
- Scott Hamilton Kennedy's *OT: our town*
- Donovan Leitch & Rebecca Chaiklin's *The Party's Over*
- Tjebbo Penning's *Morlang*
- Mina Shum's *Long Life, Happiness and Prosperity*
- Vicente Amorim's *The Middle of the World*
- Jacques Doillon's *Raja*
- Tony McNamra's *The Rage in Placid Lake*
- Rolf de Heer's *Alexandra's Project*