

## **The Naked Truth: A Life in Parts**

Extract

*The Australian*  
August 16, 2008

**It was billed as a breakthrough for sexual freedom in the '70s. But the reality of making Alvin Purple was somewhat different, as Graeme Blundell reveals in his new autobiography.**

I loved watching actors kiss. Night after night I sat in the lounge room after my parents had gone to bed and gawked at black-and-white movies. I wanted to be able to kiss like Cary Grant smooching Grace Kelly in *To Catch a Thief*, or Ingrid Bergman in *Notorious*, or Burt Lancaster holding Deborah Kerr in a wet bathing suit on the beach in *From Here to Eternity*, waves crashing around and over them.

Real life didn't seem like this, but in the sensuous close-up of the screen kiss there was never the fear of social ostracism or the weighing up of consequences that inhibited the ardour of its viewers when the lights went on. Screen kisses represented love thrown in the face of the rational. In time I would discover that kissing someone really represented a sign that a point of no return had been reached, a place it was hard, almost impossible, to retreat from; it was where all the trouble started.

So when, in early 1973, Tim Burstall offered me the role of the lead character in a new film called *Alvin Purple*, which he said was stylistically located somewhere between the titillating *Bedroom Mazurka* and the hilarious *What's Up, Doc?*, I was intrigued. When I read the script, I wondered how I could kiss all those women and simulate sex with them without embarrassment.

The script was a bit like a Carry On version of the satyr plays of ancient Greece: gross sexual antics staged as light relief between the tragedies – or so I rationalised to myself as I thought about accepting. I hardly mentioned the film to my then wife Kerry Dwyer. “Tim has something he wants me to do,” I said offhandedly. I knew there was going to be trouble.

The original script was more well-meaning than the one I was given to skim, more serious. It was written by my old friend Alan Hopgood as a reaction, he told me, to his time in *Swinging London*. Hopgood was there when the mainstream was starting to regurgitate the beliefs of the sexual counterculture as simplistic slogans – “If you don't swing, you don't get in” – that kind of thing.

Hopgood had a psychiatrist friend who told him about the use of sexual surrogates. The idea of someone using sex in “a helpful way with strangers”, as he put it, stuck with the writer. The idea of *Alvin* was born of a character who turned an affliction – sexual attractiveness – into something positive and beneficial. A simple idea, and a straightforward plot ... which became more complicated when the newly formed Hexagon Productions bought an option on the script.

Hexagon was committed to local production and Al Finney, the artful Carlton Machiavelli, had gained some prominence in its management structure. Hexagon was looking to make films in the vein of *Stork* and to take advantage of the recently announced R certificate within the context of guaranteed exhibition and distribution throughout Australia. I knew nothing of the Hexagon background when Tim offered me the role of *Alvin*, though Finney had worked closely with Tim on the brilliant promotion of *Stork*. Finney seemed to possess a miraculous grasp of what made people see movies in masses. I was simply offered the role, and given a glance at a script.

Commercial film was catching up with sex. Tim Burstall and Alan Hopgood had dressed up this reality with a sometimes earnest satire, but it was obvious it was the tits and arses that would sell. The censorship controversy had hardly languished – great publicity – and, while there were uncountable sex scenes, the message was conservative. *Alvin* said that f..king without love, without belief and commitment, was ultimately unsatisfying. This was a complicated argument in an era when anything went – and, finally, of little interest to an audience who liked to devour popcorn and Coke with their movies and their sociology; an audience who wanted to laugh, and who went jelly-kneed, panting, at the sight of bare flesh.

Did I want to be at the centre of all this? Did I have any alternative? I had a sneaking idea that, in the film industry, all an actor could do when it came to selecting scripts was see how big the role was, and then decide if you needed the money.

I thought about it and eventually discussed the offer with Kerry. At this stage, she seemed to respect my oddly developing career as a local film performer, though she wondered why she herself had not been discovered. I don't remember her ever reading the final script. If she had, I think she would have left me on the spot. And I certainly don't remember ever telling her about what I was doing during the day in any detail once the film started shooting.

With me, though, vanity went about its toxic work. Here was a chance to play big love scenes while an audience watched with prurient fascination and a sense of barely repressed envy, just as I always did when I watched movies. The avant-garde filmmakers of the '60s had overthrown the barriers that were considered to be limiting to artistic freedom. Their audiences had been alternative but the underground films of Andy Warhol, Kenneth Anger and Jonas Mekas had shown what a huge market existed for sex. Now the commercial film industry was stepping into the ensuing space.

Bringing an end to hypocrisy was an elaborate ipso facto justification. The truth was that a huge group of people also loved watching sex on screen or on stage; the confrontation with naked bodies was emerging into the realm of relative respectability, not to mention hipness. At least, I thought, the sex in the Alvin script was treated bawdily and lustily, as something the audience already knew about and enjoyed as much as the characters did. The joke was shared, if slightly twisted, because of Alvin's sense of resignation about his inevitable conquests. The script suggested a sex spoof, one that scored its points with a wink rather than a sneer, and a smile rather than a leer. It seemed like an agreeable and sometimes charming cartoon of what newspapers were calling "the chemistry between the sexes".

I could do the comedy, I thought, but it looked like I'd need the ingenuity of the Kama Sutra if I was to find ways of simulating the situations the script suggested without being arrested.

\* \* \*

ALVIN PURPLE EXPLOITED A CHANGE in Australia's censorship laws which had been introduced in late 1971. Censorship became part of the new film's subject, a target for its satire. Under a new classification system, once-banned movies could be publicly shown. The change had been introduced by the then federal minister for Customs, the late Don Chipp, in an effort to prevent the practice of banning films outright. Instead the new R-rating simply restricted films to people aged over 18. Cinemas were flooded with cheap imported movies like *The First Nudie Musical*, *Swedish Fly Girls* and *Trader Horne*, a jungle sex comedy with nudity, unbridled sexism and bad acting. Production budgets were bumped up, plots became less banal and camerawork slicker than the grindhouse movies from which they originated. The naked bed-hopping, complete with saturated colours, generic schlock sensibility, soft focus and bad-but-good lighting made distributors squeal with pleasure.

Alvin was a character frozen in an adolescent, masturbative dream of an irresistible youth and a host of perpetually available and invariably beautiful women. Invariably naked women, it must be added. There it was: the premise, the story, the hook, the joke. One hundred minutes of joke. We were not talking sophisticated, voyeuristic fantasies that were gorgeous fun or seditiously licentious; this was no voluptuous feast of emotionally charged sexuality.

Bewildered Alvin becomes a national hero, progressing from the wife of one of his high-school teachers to selling and demonstrating waterbeds. "You're a case, Alvin! You should see a psychiatrist," says Alvin's girlfriend Tina, played by pretty Elli Maclure. The "case" is this perplexing problem of irresistibility: women liked him, went for him and pursued him. After Alvin finally seeks out a female psychiatrist, played by Penne Hackforth-Jones, he is persuaded to demonstrate his greatest skill, agitated fornication, in a sex clinic, though Dr Sort's voracious sexual appetite leaves him with little energy for his role as sex therapist.

It was Kenneth Williams and Barbara Windsor stuff, with echoes of burlesque and the nightclub, and brought to mind bright little booths selling naughty seaside postcards, barnacled with double entendres, lit up like the sequins of drag queens in pantomimes. Tits and bums in the land of overheated women, ladies and gentlemen; gags about gagging, giggling, and swallowing; dick, cock and pussy jokes, and flap fillers, folks. Alvin's adventures spun along merrily, a diverting farce for adults written for an audience of children.

Years later, I thought of Alvin Purple when I found that Graham Kennedy had said that his comedy was based on a single idea: "Someone turns 11 every day."

\* \* \*

MOST OF US CONNECTED WITH THE ARTS treated the naked phenomenon with a mixture of jocularity and fear, embarrassment and curiosity; the thought of being seen as reactionary caused many to embrace something from which they instinctively shrank. Being young and nude wasn't only wonderful, it was becoming mandatory.

No industrial clauses protected the actors in the theatre or film industry when it came to nudity on screen or a director's need to see a naked actor, usually female of course. There was no one yet to argue the fine line in context or correctness the way unions did later when exploitation was finally recognised for what it really was. Every actor had stories of shame and embarrassment – and occasionally great fun.

Directors rarely worried about riding roughshod over the gender divide. It was interesting that often the only time directors physically engaged the actors was in the love scenes – arranging limbs, adjusting angles and demonstrating the kiss. It's a tradition that is adhered to today. Some found it extremely difficult to resist the urge to exercise their *droit de seigneur* over the actresses in their picture. And the film and television studios would suddenly be crammed with overalled men from other departments who obviously had nothing to do with the production. "Just came down to pick up a parcel," they muttered, their eyes glued to Abigail's breasts.

Not Burstall, of course, who was always a model of discretion on the set, even if partial to a bawdy joke. Though I'll never forget his large hands creeping into shot during rushes as he rearranged limbs and buttocks so that more pubic hair was visible. "I want to see up to the kidneys," Burstall joked, in imitation of a soft-porn director. We were acting and these cold, clammy hands were pushing and prodding as if we were porno stars. Which we sort of were, I suppose.

During the shoot Penne Hackforth-Jones was astonished when an actress playing a small role was presented with a vaginal deodorant. "You might need this," the makeup artist suggested. "I've never seen anything like it," Hackforth-Jones confided. She also told me that Burstall had not sent her the entire script. "I only got my part and at that stage I didn't see anything odd in that." But by the end of the shoot she was dismayed. "I felt like I was breathing in something other than air," she said when it was over.

Alan Hopgood was acting in the long-running ABC-TV series *Bellbird* when *Alvin* was filmed. Many of Melbourne's best young actresses were also in the series. They would stalk up to the writer the day after making cameo appearances in *Alvin Purple*. "What have you done to me?" they said to him. "I did this small bit and had to take my clothes off." Nothing like this had happened to them before. "I never thought I would have to show my breasts."

This was a new kind of acting. And a new kind of celebrity, largely unwanted, was attached to it. Never before had so much naked flesh been seen on the local cinema screen. Actors approaching such scenes were nervous and anxious, almost cowering, as though they expected someone to slap them without provocation. The exception was Abigail. Abigail was no stereotype, no caricature: she was seriously sexy. She just smiled at me and took my hand as though I was a child about to embark on a magical adventure. I followed her bottom, a true ripe twin pearl, verisimilitude easy to conjure in that shining moment, trying to conceal my moist palms and dry shudders of fear.

I quickly discovered that acting in love scenes is certainly not the fun and games the prurient-minded like to think. For actors it's often just too funny to be sexy, and pretending to have sex in front of 60 people can be a bit intimidating. In cold, dusty studios, on borrowed beds, in windy car parks, it's hardly a case of "joyous celebrations of Eros". There were still the floor marks to be hit so that the camera operator's focus could be accurately calibrated. Assistants stretched tape measures from the lens of the camera to my nose, carpenters were hammering around the set, grips and props people were making jokes and whispering and laughing. The cameraman shouted changes in the lighting to the electricians overhead, lines were muttered in rehearsal with the partially covered actress lying beside me, and the makeup artist battled to improve the line of my about-to-be love's right eyebrow. Sometimes small pieces of adhesive tape had to be replaced behind the ears (or breasts) of some actresses, having come unstuck in the heat.

Makeup artists are amiable and friendly – too much so, the actor always thinks, as though to compensate for one's physical misfortunes, the way white liberals are overly polite to black people. You always feel there is something wrong with you.

John Barrymore, one of the great silent actors, called film sex "the worship of Dingle-dangle", and it can be a problem when the dingle dangles. You never quite know what to do with it – try to hide it, tuck it away,

wear something over it, or ignore the bloody thing and hope it'll go away. "Oh no, it's wind up the giblets time," you sigh as the wardrobe standby discreetly asks you to disrobe. "Do you want me to hold anything?" they always say. They still do almost 40 years later.

Once in for the pounce, the soft focus of courtship is quickly replaced by hard-edged detail: the hair around the nipples, the too-moist flesh, the breath, the sagging flesh and folds of skin. I learnt that sex scenes are usually more melodrama than bedroom farce, with someone's ego often lying on the floor. The fact is you are travelling discreetly across a particularly troubled sexual divide and the approach has to have the cautiousness of anthropology. Politeness is the overriding mood, along with an understandable unwillingness to offend the woman who is, in a sense, your hostess – or at least letting you put your tongue down her throat.

The first actress I kissed when filming started on Alvin was Jill Forster, who was married to John Stanton, a one-time TV cop, an actor with a voice that sounded like gears crunching. Jill was playing the wife of the schoolboy Alvin's teacher, with whom the inevitable was happening. As we rehearsed she whispered, "Do you mind if I do it with my mouth closed? If my husband sees it he'll shout at me and come round and punch you." It certainly took the ardour out of the performance, though I was pleased to note that once we were under way the lips parted.

Red-haired, sexy, streetwise Kris McQuade, fearless, direct and very voluptuous, was a great kisser, her lips like boarding house puddings. In one scene, after what seemed like minutes of screen passion (this was a piece of acting when real sex was quite feasible), we looked up from the wreckage of bedclothes to find the crew had left the set. For years we were never sure whether the realism of our simulation embarrassed them or whether it was time for a tea break.

Another scene and we got into it again. Again a surreally long sequence developed – kisses, fondling, breasts heaving, teeth nipping – before someone yelled "Cut!" We looked up and the crew were lined up like an audience, and they began applauding.

\* \* \*

FOR THE NEXT 20 YEARS, whenever I thought of the early '70s film industry, I felt like I required an instant shot of antibiotics. Then I became amused and rather longed for the attention. Although widespread onscreen nudity wasn't exactly a fact of life just yet, in the TV studios and film sets of the '70 we were led to believe there were glimmers of a breakthrough. These people were as evangelical as Mormons. It was as though these producers and directors and writers saw Australia developing into a kind of sexual Utopia, a social Garden of Eden where sex was beautiful, society enlightened, and serpents had no sting. The producers and directors believed the country had youth on its side and a natural-born sincerity and curiosity. They were, most of them, a generation older than the younger actors. As the so-called sexual revolution hit Melbourne they needed to make up for lost time. There was a sense of urgency about them. The fact that it would all become incredibly licentious to the point of world-weary indifference was not the actor's concern. Who cared if the bottom fell out of toplessness?

Some producers really believed that, as artists, we had a mission to rescue citizens from their individual islands of sexual guilt by floating them on a sea of permissiveness to the mainland of self-acceptance. Some of the actors believed it too. It seemed agreeable to me. But it wasn't the producers who had to get their gear off, of course, and we actors were too young and naive to see they just wanted to turn bonking into banking and filmmaking into wanking.

I would appear in more of these productions in the next decade, though thankfully the names of most of the films and television programs I can only recall with the aid of hypnosis. Years later, only months before he died, Burstall asked me with concern: "Did the shame ever get to you?" He himself remained phlegmatic. "It is the film for which I've never been forgiven by the critics, and for which I am best known by the public," he often said. The same was true of me.

Certainly I was a pariah in Carlton when the film was released. People looked at me as though I had just returned from a stay in prison (jailbird playwrights were not yet fashionable). They kept their distance, but I was aware of the prickling of the skin, my neck burning with the intensity of the looks – glares sometimes – directed at the back of my head.

But Alvin was a "runaway success". The movie's promotion became an excuse for every conceivable lowbrow pun. Photos of my naked buttocks bore the tag: "No end in sight." Within days of its release there were queues outside the cinema spiralling around the block in Melbourne. Soon the posters trumpeted

"The Country's Doing it for Alvin". After five weeks more than half a million people had seen the movie in 20 cities around Australia. "We've come of age," quickly became a tired tabloid joke about the movie's success and what it meant for the film industry. I was promoted as Australia's "first stalker", the "new leader of the comedy revolution", and the actor who "pushed Down Under up into the sexy '70s".

Fun for adolescents maybe, but Alvin Purple's success sent reviewers away shrill with scorn, hysterical with political rage and contempt. "How trite, how culturally inexact, how pointless!" they cried from the walls of their High Art castles. "Above all, how popular!" The film's success seemed an affront.

Al Finney just shook his head in a kind of comic dismay at the reaction of the critics. "They just don't want an industry," he said. "They only want a culture."

Along with Barry Humphries and Bruce Beresford with their "Bazza" McKenzie movies, Burstall gave permission to a new generation of artists to identify with Australia while satirising the incompleteness of its cosmopolitan journey. As critic Tony Moore said: "Ockers like Barry McKenzie, Stork, Alvin Purple and the loutish Laborites at Don's Party made a loud nuisance of themselves as they crashed through classes, genders, ethnicities and nationalities."

The critics brayed for years. Alvin Purple was blamed for perpetuating the Australian cultural cringe, a form of obsessive compulsive disorder suffered by filmmakers who kept returning to the same lowbrow themes, projecting a vigorous and funny but oh-so-common self-loathing sense of national embarrassment.

In the years to come, Alvin would stand as a potent symbol of the shortcomings of the baby-boomer era, along with Kombi vans and ponytails. The film would become an emblem of evil in the right-wing backlash against the '70s, when people of my age went about trashing precious social institutions, destroying taboos, devaluing motherhood and squandering the moral capital built up by their forebears. The smirky, winking, lascivious emblem of Alvin Purple – long hair, thin lips, skinny shoulders and big nose – became synonymous with the period's supposed lack of spiritual meaning, decline in social connectedness, absence of expectations and limits, the breakdown in authority structures and even falling church attendance.

\* \* \*

ALVIN PURPLE CAME TO REPRESENT a pervasive, narcissistic popular culture in a world that had stopped feeling, portraying what was extreme, abnormal behaviour as somehow desirable. Conservative critics kept throwing their hands in the air. "Films like this risk making all of us numb," they wailed. "Its success strips us of the ability to feel outrage."

"There was certainly a shadow," says Alan Hopgood now. "The shame followed us both. You were never going to play Hamlet after that film, were you?" But he feels slightly embarrassed at his seeming disapproval of his script's treatment during the filming period. "My piece was simply a small piece of the jigsaw. I feel a bit proud of it now."

It was overlooked for many years that the dreaded Alvin Purple was the most successful Australian film made to that point. The success proved that people wanted to see Australian films, though no one had really expected it to take off except Tim Burstall.

Alvin "cut through", as distributors liked to say. There was a rowdy party at the Burstalls' house in Carlton to celebrate Alvin's first box-office-breaking week. The lush Dutch wife of Roadshow's managing director, Graham Burke, made a speech about "wat a greet tax dodging" Australian films were proving to be. She presented me with a \$500 cheque – "as za kind of boneos" – on behalf of Roadshow. Alvin Purple was the most commercially successful Australian film between 1973 and 1977. It took more than \$4 million, from a budget of just over \$200,000, at a time when cinema tickets cost \$2.50.

All up, I earned \$3500 for Alvin Purple.

*This extract was found at:*

**<http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0,25197,24201256-5012694,00.html>**