



Moral mirror

We all know that bad things happen when good people do nothing, but what would you do? A new Aussie film isn't afraid to ask the question, writes Joanne McCarthy.

FIRST-TIME film producer Brendan Sloane knows how audience members react when provoked about standing up to be counted on a moral issue.

"Some people have been pretty riled up by this little film," said Sloane, one of two men behind the independent Australian movie *The Dinner Party*, which was inspired by the killing of Charlestown man Joe Cinque in Canberra in 1997.

"When you show characters making the excuses people use when they don't want to get involved, people don't want to see it because they know what they're seeing is themselves.

"We all like to think we'd say or do something to stop a bad thing happening. We decided to make a film that would get people thinking about the idea that maybe they wouldn't do anything."

The Dinner Party will screen for the first time at Dungog Film Festival (May 28 to 31).

It tells the story of a dinner party where guests are told a woman, Angela, plans to commit suicide after killing her boyfriend, Joel, because he wants their relationship to end.

An unlikely premise if it was fiction, but when inspired by a true event, it is a powerful base on which to explore the idea that bad things happen when good people do nothing, Sloane said.

At the trial of Anu Singh for the killing of Joe Cinque, the court was told a witness who was aware of a murder/suicide plan being discussed by Singh threatened to call police.

But when she phoned another friend who was also aware of the plan, she was told it was "none of her business", the court was told.

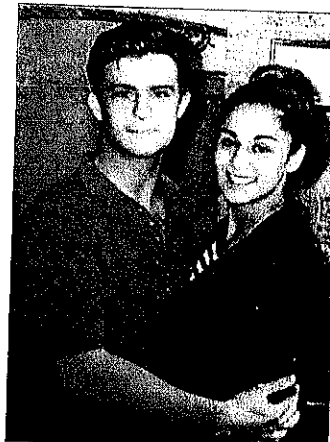
From those few facts the seed of *The Dinner Party* grew, Sloane said.

"We don't judge. We just explore some of the reasons why people do the things they do. It's a late-night, dark kind of film, with some black humour, but it's a thriller that builds towards events in the final 10 minutes," he said.

Some of the blackness of the film could be traced to the time it was written and made in 2006, he said.

"The Howard era was a time when you had to have courage to stand up and be counted on some issues," he said.

"That's where the story was born for us. We're passionate and angry about what happens in a world overwrought



NEW FOCUS: Joe Cinque and Anu Singh. Lara Cox in *The Dinner Party*, top.

with rules and bureaucracy, where you stand sometimes and ask: 'Where have all the heroes gone?'

"We made it at a time where there was nothing to be gained for those who stood up but the knowledge they got

involved, that they had done something."

Sloane and writer/director Scott Murden are proud of their film, after gestation that included putting up ten thousands of dollars of their own money and rejection by the Australian Film Commission (now Screen Australia).

"We think it was a bit controversial then. In the end," Sloane said.

"They were enthusiastic for months about funding post-production, but then I think the subject matter was too much for them."

Sloane, 32, does not want anyone to watch his film just because it's Australian.

"What I'd say to people is we don't want your sympathy ticket. Come to see it because you'll be taken on an emotional roller-coaster, but don't just support it because it's Australian," he said.

"There's been way too much marketing of local movies along the lines of 'This is a must-see Australian film'."

"I think there's been a lot of films put out carrying the same flavour.

"If I see another Australian film that all about sexual discovery I'll choke. It's a nobody first-time producer looking at the industry from the outside but we're just getting the same kind of films with the same kind of marketing, and I don't think it's doing the Australian film industry any good at all."

He urged young filmmakers to have faith in their ideas and not to be put off by the processes involved with producing a completed film.

"The government systems and the bureaucratic processes that can be associated with filmmaking are as much about politics as they are about whether you've got a good product," he said.

"I'd say to anyone wanting to make a film, do not see these guys and processes as the only way to get a film up in Australia.

"The technology age allows rogue filmmakers, like myself, to have a say."

Sloane, who started his career as a theatre actor and is known by many as the "Magnet-Mart man" after 250 television advertisements for the company, said he was delighted the film would have its first official screening at the Dungog Film Festival.

"I've never been there before but it's got a historic cinema, a great name, and I like the sound of it. I'll definitely be there for the screening.

"We're in a 10.45pm timeslot so it's a film for the night owls, but I quite like that."

The film stars Lara Cox as Angela. Cox rang Sloane late one night after reading the script to say she wanted the part.

"Lara is known for lighter things like *Heartbreak High* but she wanted something tougher. She's taken it on and in the end she eats this role for breakfast," Sloane said.

During an interview in 2007 to coincide with the 10th anniversary of her son's death, Maria Cinque said *The Dinner Party* was written with the views of herself and husband Nino in mind.

Taking the focus away from the killer and investigating the decisions of others had her support, she said.