

One party you'll never leave

There are big hopes for a Canberra feature film based on a dinner party that ends in murder, as David Curry discovers

You've been invited to a dinner party. It's not hard to imagine – Canberrans love dinner parties, right? But this one is different: you know that the hosts, a couple, are going to commit suicide afterwards. Weird enough, but as the night unfolds the "suicide" begins to look like something more sinister.

What do you do?

The makers of a new Canberra film called *The Dinner Party* intend to make you answer that question. Brendan Sloane, one of the film's two producers, is interested in the much-devalued concept of duty of care. Not the legal duty of care, so easily side-stepped by a smart lawyer, but the personal, moral duty of care. When do you have a responsibility to step in to help somebody out?

"What's happened to that element of our culture where you stand up for what's right?" Sloane says. "That's what our film's about. It says, well, would you have done nothing and let this guy die? But we don't judge, we just lay it out."

If the plot rings a bell it probably should.

Although the story is fictional, writer and director Scott Murden admits part of the inspiration came from an infamous Canberra incident. In 1997, in a house on Antill Street, Dickson, Australian National University law student Anu Singh first drugged her boyfriend Joe Cinque with Rohypnol and then injected him with a lethal dose of heroin. She was later convicted of manslaughter. Two nights before Joe Cinque died, Singh had hosted a dinner party that the guests understood to be some kind of suicide send-off.

Murden wants to emphasise that *The Dinner Party* is not the Anu Singh story. "Some things you might draw parallels with, but we've made up our own characters," he says.

"We're interested more in the duty of care aspect. It's like our morals are compromised by really easy things. It's not because we're evil or anything; it's because we wanted to go out and



Canberra film *The Dinner Party* has a sinister plot, signs of evidence and lots of suspense.

get a feed, or, 'I thought one of the other girls was going to do something about it, so I don't have to do anything'."

I am reminded of a story in May about a woman who died overnight in a car in Ngunnawal. The car was parked on a busy street, the engine running, for about 12 hours before somebody called the police. One nearby resident saw the woman alive in the car, on two occasions five hours apart, and thought she was probably drunk. And did nothing.

Sloane and Murden are a study in opposites. The shaven-headed Sloane is all restless energy, with an exuberance that spills in all directions. He laughs easily and loudly. He started out as a theatre actor (he has a small part in *The Dinner Party*) but is probably best known in Canberra as "the Magnet-Mart man" for his long-running role in their TV ads.

In contrast, Murden mostly sits quietly, peering through his rectangle glasses and listening to the conversation with the hint of a smile. An observer. He speaks quietly and economically. He has studied at the New York Film Academy, done an internship with a Hollywood writer in Canada, and written several short films in collaboration with Sloane.

They both readily admit to being film geeks. "It's such a great medium," Murden says. "We watch everything," Sloane says. They riff for a while on the subject of Australian films, but it's their own film they really want to talk about. It's been a long time coming.

In early 2006 Murden and Sloane

projects to make the shoot. Sam Lyndon's agent rang back quickly to tell them they had "a really good script" and that Lyndon was on board.

When Lara Cox read the script, she was already in a position to command a healthy fee. Cox, who grew up in Canberra, first starred in *Heartbreak High*, and later in *H2O: Just Add Water*. She has also appeared in *Voodoo Lagoon* and *Kangaroo Jack*. Did she want to play the lead role, an unstable and possessive woman, in a low-budget movie shot in Canberra?

"I definitely wanted to be part of it," she says, "because I thought Angela would be quite challenging to play, which is always exciting and inspiring. I haven't had a lot of opportunities to play people like that, and I was keen to challenge people's perceptions of what I can and can't do."

Sloane says Cox could normally expect to be paid up to \$100,000 for the kind of role he was pitching, but she came on board for a small fraction of that plus a share of the profits. A week before the shoot, Cox wavered; she had been offered a role in *McLeod's Daughters*. Sloane told her not to feel bad and to do whatever she had to do. She rang back: "No, I'm too into this now. I can't leave."

In September 2006 after three weeks of rehearsal, shooting finally began. The six key actors – Lara Cox, Ben Seton, Mariane Power, Sam Lyndon, Kai Harris and Jessica Turner – assembled in a Narrabundah apartment, the setting for the dinner party. According to Murden, the average film shoot is 50 days. For Australian films, generally on low budgets, it's about 35 days. *The Dinner Party* took 12. Cox remembers the shoot as quick and intense.

"It was crazy, but good," she says. "We didn't really have days off. We'd film all day, go home for a bit of sleep, and come back. The intensity was maintained very easily. The subject matter was so intense, anyway."

Many of the crew, including the cameraman, shot the film on their holidays for a small up-front payment and a share of the profits. "We couldn't ask people to do this for a minimal amount of money," Sloane says, "so we took the approach of sharing it with them, and that filtered through to their passion for the film."

Sloane did some shots himself, getting up at 6am every day for a month to film fog rolling across Canberra for time-lapse sequences in the film. "We wanted those sorts of shots to crowd in on the audience as this drama was building," he says.

Many local businesses made offers of help – impressed, Sloane says, that the Magnet Mart guy was producing the film. Cusack's Furniture offered \$40,000 worth of furniture. Two real estate companies, Elders and Metropolis, offered houses for the shoot. Even Chick Henry got involved, working with the ACT Street Machine Club to provide cars for a scene in Braddon.

Post-production came next, and after a long year of editing, Sloane and Murden had something resembling a film. But they were worried. Having been so close to it for so long, had they lost perspective? Was it rubbish? In November last year they showed a rough edit to an audience at Dendy Cinemas.

"People screamed at it, walked out on it, got angry at it, and talked about it for hours afterwards," Sloane says. "That's exactly the film we wanted to create – something that would make people go, 'Why didn't anybody do anything?' We saw the reactions and thought, 'We're hitting the mark.'"

They were emboldened, too, when the ACT Government, through ScreenACT, granted them \$10,000 in March for post-production. Kim Lewis, a professional consultant to the film industry, assessed the grant application. He noted in his report that the film was "impressive", "very professional", and that it dealt with contemporary social issues in "a dramatic and compelling way". There was "little doubt" the film would find an Australian distributor.

Andy Marriot, the managing director of Canberra's Silver Sun Pictures, currently doing the post-production work on the film, was

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talked about finding a story for an ensemble piece that could be shot fairly quickly, on a tiny budget. By April, Murden had a script and the two leapt into action with second producer Bradley Diebert, who has worked on big projects such as *The Matrix*. They decided right away they would reverse the normal process of making a movie: they would shoot it first, then worry about everything else. Like money.

"Usually what takes the longest is getting the money together in pre-production," Murden says. "I have a friend who took 2½ years to be ready for the shoot."

Sloane sold his convertible and gently suggested to his girlfriend that they put off buying a house. She agreed. With no big dollars to offer, Sloane and Murden began making calls to agents, hoping the strength of the script and their enthusiasm would be enough to lure the actors.

It was. Actress Mariane Power, Murden says, was non-committal until she read the script. She immediately rang Murden – at 11pm – and said "Oh my God! Look, I know I shouldn't be ringing you, but I have to be Sky Holden." Ben Seton liked the script so much he rearranged other

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similarly impressed. While there was a lot of visual and audio polishing to be done, he had no doubts about the quality of the underlying product.

“If you don’t have a really good film to begin with, then all you’re doing is polishing a turd,” he says. “We can see past a rough draft very easily, and we were just engaged and gripped straight away. It was a wonderful story, told very well, and the acting was first-rate,” he says.

The Dinner Party, then, could be the very first feature film made entirely in Canberra that is actually distributed to cinemas around

the country – perhaps the world. Sloane, for one, is pumped. He’s poured \$75,000 of his own money into the film and “worked like a Trojan” for more than two years. With the ScreenACT grant and \$80,000 from an investor who wants to remain anonymous, he will be able to polish the film to the point where it is technically as good as the story. By mid-August he and Murden will have a film, not a script or a rough cut. Then it will be a matter of sending the film out to distributors and holding out for the best offer.

The Magnet Mart man grins broadly. “Bring it on!”

Lara Cox and Ben Seton in a scene from the film. Says Cox, a former Canberra girl, of the role, “I haven’t had a lot of opportunities to play people like that, and I was keen to challenge people’s perceptions of what I can and can’t do.”

Pictures: Lisa Tolcher

WHAT'S ON

Stories on Sunday with special guest Hazel Edwards

Sunday 29 June 11 am – 12 noon

Join Hazel Edwards, award-winning author of the all-time favourite *There's a Hippopotamus on our Roof Eating Cake* for a wintry tale about Antarctic exploration! Suitable for children of primary school age and older. Free

The Hall

First Australians tour

Sunday 6 – Sunday 13 July 11 am – 12 noon

This daily tour through the Gallery of First Australians provides an insight into Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' history, cultures, spirituality and connection to Country. Free

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Fourth Annual Didjeridu Competition

Sunday 6 July 1–2 pm

Presented in association with Corroboree Man Phillip Yubbagurri Brown, this popular competition will include prizes for best solo didj player, best original artwork or didj, best junior didj player and most unique didj. Free

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Wiradjuri Echo: Dance workshop

Tuesday 8 and Wednesday 9 July 2–3 pm

Join Indigenous artist Duncan Smith in this traditional Indigenous dance workshop for children. Suitable for primary school-aged children. Cost: \$7 per child; \$5 for Friends. Bookings essential on (02) 6208 5021.

The Hall

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