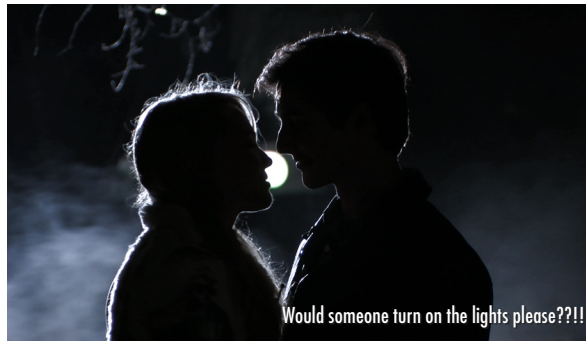


## THE DINNER PARTY

Rating R  
 Time 88 minutes  
 Country Australia  
 Director Scott Murden  
 Cast Lara Cox, Ben Seton, Marianne Power, Kai Harris  
 Distributor Pack Screen  
 Worth \$12.50  
 Released October 7

"...it's damn good..."



Would someone turn on the lights please??!

Inspired by an actual, highly newsworthy event, to say which might give too much away, yet the "you'll be dying for an invite" tagline gives you a reasonable idea what *The Dinner Party* is about. Made in Canberra, this inventively taut and strongly performed psychological thriller about a group of uni students has grander themes beyond telling a tense tale. But again, to talk about them would be spoiling things.

Made back in 2006 and shot for \$35,000 over ten days (with an additional \$150,000 spent wisely on post-production), *The Dinner Party* is fuelled by a startling performance by Canberra native Lara Cox (TV's *Heartbreak High* and *The Lost World*). As the somewhat psychotic Angela, Cox has an instinctive way of portraying what it's like to be a young woman on the very edge; the way that she holds her head slightly

forward, and the look in her eyes – which can change in a heartbeat – makes her character entirely convincing.

*The Dinner Party* was made on the cheap but the shoestring only rarely shows. There's the odd clunky moment near the start, but Cox's stand-out lead performance, the intelligent script and, for the most part, the above average supporting performances (especially from Ben Seton as Angela's boyfriend, Joel) lift it beyond its headline budget. As does the first class original score by Oonagh Sherrard – the haunting music becomes infused with the dialogue, quickening your pulse rate and sense of foreboding.

Writer/director Scott Murden – who's made around ten short films – has proven that he has considerable talent with his debut feature film. Given more time and money, the people behind this may have produced something akin to, say, *Lantana*. As it is, *The Dinner Party* is not quite at that level, but it's damn good – and it needs no "all things considered" excuses. **Annette Basile**

## THE HUMAN CENTIPEDE

Rating R  
 Time 109 minutes  
 Country Netherlands  
 Director Tom Six  
 Cast Dieter Laser, Ashley C. Williams, Ashlynn Rennie, Akihiro Kitamura  
 Distributor Monster Pictures  
 Worth \$11.00  
 Released August 26 (Adelaide) September 4 (Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane)

"...probably one for horror buffs only."



"BACK IN LINE!"

*The Human Centipede* is not a fifties creature feature, as its name might suggest, but rather an exploration of the ultimate bodily violation. Set in Germany, the film follows the efforts of deranged surgeon Dr. Heiter to create a "human centipede" – a series of humans attached anus to mouth, sharing a single digestive tract. Taken at face value, this seems a ridiculous conceit, but part of the film's power is the

way in which it absorbs the viewer so completely into its nightmarish scenario. German character actor Dieter Laser is transfixing as the surgeon, whom he plays with menacing (and later rabid) intensity. His marvelously alien features are used to great effect. Also contributing to the atmosphere is the film's pared down sensibility and cleverly unsettling soundtrack, which uses heightened ambient noise to chilling effect.

Writer/director Tom Six is notable for helping to kick off the original *Big Brother* reality TV series in his native Netherlands. It comes as a relief, then, that in spite of the extreme subject matter, *The Human Centipede* does not exploit its young leads. At the outset, the two female characters (played by Ashley C. Williams and Ashlynn Yennie) appear as almost comical horror stereotypes. Like those party girls who adorn every American slasher flick, they are attractive, ditz and out of their element. But the film takes a less conventional turn, and the viewer is soon forced into a position of extreme empathy with them, as well as with their male counterpart (Akihiro Kitamura).

*The Human Centipede* is a film about the integrity of the human body, and it raises an interesting question. What remains of humanity when the body has undergone a devastating transformation? It's not an easy film to watch, and is probably one for horror buffs only. They, however, should make an attempt to see it.

**Katerina Sakkas**

## THE TREE

Rating M  
 Time 100 minutes  
 Country Australia/France  
 Director Julie Bertuccelli  
 Cast Charlotte Gainsbourg, Marton Csokas, Aden Young, Morgana Davies  
 Distributor Transmission/Paramount  
 Worth \$14.50  
 Released September 30

"...simply quite beautiful."



What do you know... a posturepedic tree.

There's something of the rough diamond in this exquisite film. The unvarnished rural Queensland images are stunning, and the performances are the stuff of real life.

A French-Australian co-production, *The Tree* follows Simone (an extraordinary Morgana Davies), an eight-year-old who believes that her recently deceased father (Aden Young) speaks to her through a magnificent Moreton Bay fig (a tree that apparently took two years of location

scouting to "cast"). Young Davies has a wisdom beyond her years, and holds her own as an actress against the formidable talents of Charlotte Gainsbourg (*Antichrist*), who plays her mum, Dawn. Gainsbourg is sensational, and the widowed Dawn is authentic, inspiring and courageous.

French director Julie Bertuccelli (*Since Otter Left*) takes an organic approach, coaxing great performances out of the young cast; Davies may be the stand-out,

but the actors playing her siblings are also excellent. An assured filmmaker, Bertuccelli drives this at a gentle pace, but the narrative creeps up on you. You're involved before you even realise it as *The Tree* builds on itself until the incredible – and cinematic – climax.

*The Tree* is as much about love – romantic and familial – as it is about loss, with romance appearing in Dawn's life in the form of local plumber, George (an earthy Marton Csokas). It says something meaningful about the state of grief – living with it and moving through it – while the Moreton Bay fig itself is a character, offering something potentially esoteric. But when it comes to spiritual matters, the film – which has its surprises – leaves you to draw your own conclusions. Loss is central to this story, but this isn't another Australian film that will be accused of being bleak. It's realistic yet hopeful, a little mystical and simply quite beautiful. You can see why it was chosen to close the Cannes Film Festival – and why Cannes gave it a seven-minute standing ovation.

**Annette Basile**