



## LANTANA: A JOURNEY THROUGH THE LABYRINTH OF LIFE

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### AN WE BELIEVE IN LOVE?

Loving someone means we have to relinquish power. It's mutual surrender.'

'Lantana is part mystery, part thriller and part journey through the labyrinth of life.'

### Background

*Lantana* was written by the leading playwright, Andrew Bovell, and is based on his internationally produced play, *Speaking in Tongues*, which was itself a morphing of two short plays he had written—*Whiskey* and *Distant Lights*. In his screenplay notes Bovell comments that he:

*... was interested in finding new narrative shapes in theatre. I wanted to work on a lateral plane rather than a linear one. I was interested in the random connections between people and how we make sense of our own lives through encountering the lives of others.'*

And from here he developed a central sense of yearning through his eight main characters, of whom all are searching to make sense of their different lives. It wasn't long before Bovell was approached by Ray Lawrence, who had seen the play several times, and who suggested the possibility of a film.

Bovell had already written several screenplays, including co-writing *Strictly Ballroom*, yet he found writing *Lantana* very challenging in that he was adapting a play to a screenplay:

*Perhaps the greatest shift though from play to screenplay lies in their differing resolutions. In the play the end is sudden and ambiguous, leaving us uncertain about what actually happened to Valerie. In the film Valerie's fate is revealed.'*

However the depth of each of each of his characters and the version of Australian society that is depicted,

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adapts successfully to the screen.

**The film**

*A thundering chorus of cicadas, the unmistakable sound of summer.*

*Pull back through the twisted vine. Shafts of sunlight penetrate the dark undergrowth. It is thick, entangled, covered in thorns and out of control. The air is close. We can hardly breath. A fly buzzes, loud and insistent. Something dirty and pale is glimpsed through the foliage. Skin.*

*Slowly the body of a woman is revealed, draped like a cloth through the vine. One foot wears a black leather shoe. The other is bare and pale. There's dried blood between her toes. Her stocking is torn. Her legs are scratched and stained with mud. A black leech sucks on the inside of her calf.*

*Her face remains concealed. We come to rest on her hands cupped at her chest. She wears a simple gold wedding band.*

And so the film starts—giving us our victim, location and the mystery that the film's narrative will loosely follow. However, what sets itself up to be a thriller becomes an intense drama of emotional exploration to which the question of who killed Valerie Somers is almost incidental. The writer himself said that the murder case '... is like a stone dropped into a still pond,

the ripples circling out and affecting all that they touch'.<sup>4</sup> And touch they do, as throughout the film each of the eight central characters meet, briefly but intensely.

Influenced by the multi-narrative films of Robert Altman, and films such as *Happiness* (Todd Solondz, 1998) and *Magnolia* (Paul Thomas Anderson, 1999), *Lantana* is based around the lives of four married couples. One couple includes Leon Zat (Anthony LaPaglia)—a middle-aged Sydney cop going through a midlife crisis— and his wife Sonya (Kerry Armstrong), who goes to see a psychiatrist in an attempt to repair a marriage that is simply 'going through the motions'.

Dr Valerie Somers (the psychiatrist) is also in a stagnant marriage to the academic, John Knox (Geoffrey Rush). Both are grieving the loss of their daughter in different ways and Knox comments in the

film that, 'some marriages are held together by love, ours is through grief'. When Valerie is reported missing by her husband it is Leon who is called in to investigate, and this initiates the narrative intersection of these two couples.

In an attempt to repair his marriage Leon agrees to Latin dancing lessons and, ironically, it is here that he meets Jane O'May (Rachel Blake) with whom he has an affair. This affair connects Jane's neighbours—Paula (Daniella Farinacci) and Nik Daniels (Vince Colosimo)—to the narrative.

Nik and Paula have a loving, trusting relationship and contrast very much to the other two couples. They are struggling financially and Nik stays home to look after the kids. Late one night Jane is looking out of her window and sees Nik throw something into the lantana bushes that surround the house. On her morning run she

retrieves the item—a high-heeled shoe—and it is only when she sees a report on television that Valerie is missing, that she connects the two incidents.

It is at this point that the relationships are tested.

While investigating Valerie's case, Leon stumbles across a confidential patient file in her office—his wife's. He steals the tape of his wife's session, and it is here that we can begin to see a man who is riddled with guilt, not wanting to hear what he knows his wife will say.

Bovell's clever screenplay reveals information and details in such a way that we, the audience, jump to conclusions regarding 'whodunnit'. As the narrative follows the main suspects and characters, with many twists and turns, it exposes each of the couples at their most vulnerable moments—an affair, a murdered child, an arrest, and falling out of love. The final outcomes are unexpected yet satisfying. *Lantana* is more than just another Australian drama; it is, as the writer himself puts it, 'part mystery, part thriller and part journey through the labyrinth of life'.<sup>5</sup>

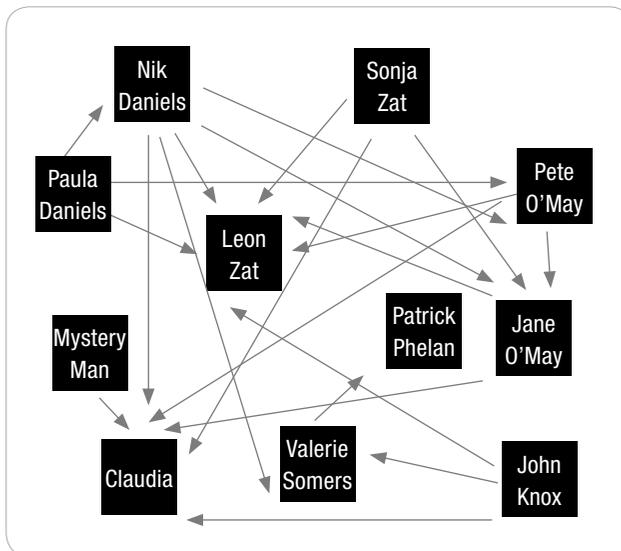
**The characters**

**Leon Zat**  
(Anthony LaPaglia)

'It is not an affair. It is a one night stand that has happened twice!'

Leon is a middle-aged man trying to turn back the clock. He runs until he

**Who meets who ...**



has heart tremors, perhaps attempting to feel really alive. He is having an affair with Jane and he is over-worked and aggressive. In the process of the film he realizes that he is not only losing his wife but also his two sons, as the Valerie Somers case forces him to think about his own marriage. In a conversation with John Knox he is asked, 'Never desired another woman?' and answers 'No', whilst knowing that he is really no better than John.

### John Knox

(Geoffrey Rush)

John: You look bereft Leon.

Leon: Yeah ... the question is how come you don't.

John: Don't be deceived by appearances ...

A Professor of Law at a university, John Knox is a man that is grieving for both his dead daughter and his marriage. While his wife deals with her grief publicly, John has not yet come to terms with his daughter's death since she was killed several years ago. 'I left work late ... and stopped at the place where my daughter was killed. I go there sometimes. Valerie didn't know.' John is the first person accused when his wife goes missing. A lonely man before his wife disappeared, he is now coming to terms with being truly alone.

### Valerie Somers

(Barbara Hershey)

'Trust is as vital to human relationships as breath is to

life, and just as elusive.'

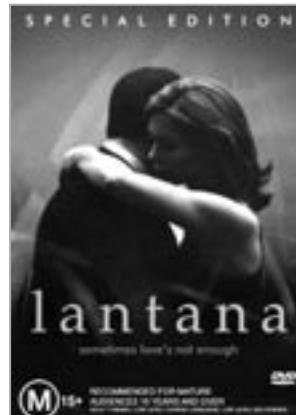
Valerie has written a book on her daughter's death and speaks publicly about grief, love and trust—all of which are missing from her own marriage. Professionally she sees Sonja Zat and Patrick Phelan, who are both seeking solutions to the problems in their lives. As a result of what is divulged by her patients, Valerie becomes almost paranoid that her husband is having an affair—with a man. Lighting candles in a shrine to her daughter we see Valerie as someone who appears in control, but is in truth unable to deal with her daughter's death nor with the grief experienced by her own husband. Valerie's 'trust' in human nature sees her get into a passerby's car when her's breaks down and she is never again seen alive.

### Sonja Zat

(Kerry Armstrong)

'I'm middle-aged. And I've got these two beautiful boys ... but I like the lines around my eyes. I don't know if he does, but I do ... I could survive. If I had to.'

Sonja is an intelligent woman who is seeking to repair her tired marriage and broken family life. She goes to see Valerie for advice and reassurance. She believes she is a good mother and a good wife to Leon. She shows strength and courage, and when she finds herself attracted to another man she walks away, knowing that it is the wrong thing to do.



### Jane O'May

(Rachael Blake)

'I met a man. He's married.'

Jane has recently separated from her husband and is determined to move on with her life. She wants to find excitement and exuberance and sees Latin Dance lessons as a way to achieve this. She plays a pivotal role in the narrative when she discovers the shoe of the missing psychiatrist, Valerie Somers, and when she calls the police and reports her neighbour, Nik, as a suspect.

### Central concerns of the film

#### Grief

Both grief in death and grief in relationships are represented in *Lantana*. Valerie and John's daughter, Eleanor, was murdered several years ago and their marriage has disintegrated as a result of their lack of communication. Valerie has written a book on grief and lectures both publicly and to her patients, but is unable to communicate with her husband. She is oblivious it seems to the

fact that he cannot accept what has happened and blames himself. Various other people are also in a state of grieving in the film. It is interesting to look at what point a relationship is unable to work and, in the film, which couples are portrayed as representing some hope and which ones aren't.

#### Love

Sonja states, in a session with Valerie, that she loves her husband; despite believing that he is having an affair. Jane has left her husband because she has 'fallen out of love' with him. Paula and Nik appear able to weather anything that is thrown at their relationship because they love one another. It is interesting to note the different ways love is represented in the film and how each of the characters interprets the emotion.

#### Trust

One of the truly poignant moments of the film comes when Jane asks Paula how she knows that Nik didn't abduct or harm Valerie Somers. 'Because he said so' is her response, and this succinctly illustrates the importance of trust in a relationship. It is Paula and Nik's relationship that is able to withstand the test that is represented by the murder and the ensuing investigation, and it is this relationship that is perceived as something to aspire to by the other couples in the film. However, it is trust, or lack of it that costs Valerie her



life.

The title

'To me the lantana vine visually manifested the interweaving and mysterious nature of the story I was trying to tell.'<sup>6</sup>

lan•ta•na (lǎn-tǎ nǎ, -tǎ nǎ) n.

Any of various aromatic, chiefly tropical shrubs of the genus Lantana, having dense spikes or heads and small colorful flowers.<sup>7</sup>

'Throw it in the lantana'<sup>8</sup> was a popular solution to many household problems, its dense and speedy growth covering all that was hidden beneath it in weeks. This can be seen in the film—literally in terms of Nik throwing the shoe away, and symbolically in that the characters conceal the truth and details like a lantana bush.

Camera Techniques

The opening sequence of the film is a chilling work of art—the eerie sounds of the cicadas, the slow pan over the lantana bush. The camera then goes beneath the surface so that we catch a glimpse of a body—bruised, bleeding and broken; a woman's body. This opening sequence can bear watching again and again. It can be watched without visuals to establish the significance of the sound, and vice versa. It is this opening, establishing shot of the film that can be used to reveal just how powerful visual language and camera

techniques can be.

This is just one of many scenes in the film fit for analysis.

Some other elements to look for are:

- The contrasts between scenes
- The colour and vibrancy of the Latin dancing scenes
- The way Jane is filmed as inside looking out, always viewed in dim lighting
- The way that Paula and Nik are always brightly lit.

Why teach Lantana?

It is extremely important to show students films that are different and challenge dominantly held values. In showing students *Lantana* they not only come to realize that Australia is capable of producing a compelling dramatic thriller, but they are asked to think about the film's version of Australian culture and relationships. The film cleverly connects all its characters in unexpected ways, inspired by the concept of 'Six Degrees of Separation'. Students can research this idea and discuss it in relation to the film. Do you agree that everyone on this earth is connected by a maximum of six removes?

*Lantana* would be best taught to VCE students. I chose VCE Literature Unit 1 as it consolidates the work done on Australian novels and allows the students to review the film in

preparation for Unit 3 where they need to complete a similar task.

Questions for Study:

- Love is represented in many ways in *Lantana*—discuss in relation to the film, referring to the relationships we witness.
- How does the opening scene of *Lantana* reflect on what is to unfold in more than just a literal sense? Discuss film techniques in your answer.
- 'We don't know what to do anymore. We do not know what to feel anymore.' Discuss how this is true in the case of one character from *Lantana*?
- Valerie Somers asks in *Lantana*, 'Can we believe in love? Loving someone means we have to relinquish power. It's mutual surrender.' Is this how love is portrayed in the film?
- 'Trust is as vital to human relationships as breath is to life and just as elusive.' Is this illustrated for us in *Lantana*?

Awards

*Lantana* scooped seven Major AFI awards in 2001, including:

- **Best Film**
- **Best Director** Ray Lawrence
- **Best actor** Anthony LaPaglia
- **Best Actress** Kerry Armstrong
- **Best Supporting Actor**

Vince Colosimo

- **Best Supporting Actress** Rachel Blake
- **Best Adapted Screenplay** Andrew Bovell

Further Viewing

*Happiness* (Todd Solondz, 1998) \*Rated R

*Magnolia* (Paul Thomas Anderson, 1999)

*American Beauty* (Sam Mendes, 2000)

*Six Degrees of Separation* (Fred Schepisi, 1993)

Robert Altman films (i.e. *The Player*, 1992, *Short Cuts*, 1993)

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Endnotes

- 1 A. Bovell, *Lantana* Screenplay Currency Press, Sydney, p. 11.
- 2 Ibid, p. 9.
- 3 Ibid, p. 11.
- 4 Ibid, p. 11.
- 5 Ibid, p. 11.
- 6 Ibid, p. 11.
- 7 www.dictionary.com
- 8 E. Dark, *Lantana Lane*. Collins, London, 1960.