



# DAVID STEVENS' *THE SUM OF US*

by Su Langker

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## 1. Why study a film script?

Most of us are now quite used to reading plays. However, any study of the play *on the page* that does not take into account an imaginative construction of how that play might appear *on the stage* will be not a complete study of the play. It is true also with the study of a film script. We may have more instructions to help us visualise the script as it would appear on film, but that imaginative leap still must be made. When we view the film, we are in a good position to determine whether it is true to what we see as the writer's intentions, or whether we might not have interpreted some of it differently. We are in a position to judge the success, or otherwise, of the choice of visual images to support the ideas the scriptwriter wishes to convey.

## 2. How does a film script differ from the text of a play?

Both a film and a play communicate by visual as well as verbal means, but the writer of a film script has the ability to indicate far more visual means of communication than does the writer of a play. The playwright must create a world in the minds of the audience through the exchanges between the characters. The principal difference between a play and a film script is that the play script is a much more complete work. Essentially a theatre director realises the written play text. He may drop a scene, edit lines, create a visual

trick to overcome a missing moment in the text, but the basic task is to realise the written word on a stage. A film scriptwriter's task is to provide a blueprint for the work of the director, the cinematographer, the designer, the composer, the sound designer, the actors.

Both the playwright and the film scriptwriter contribute their creative vision, sometimes called 'the world' of the play or film, but the theatre director *interprets* the play, whereas the film crew *build upon* the film script. Another difference is that film is a more visual medium in that the camera interprets what the audience sees. On the stage, we watch the whole play unfold. A moment may be highlighted by a sound effect or lighting change, but this cannot compare to the detail the camera can reveal. For example: a play text calls for the character of an old lady. Her characteristic is 'frailty' and the actor acts 'frailty' on stage. A film script calls for the same characteristic, but the writer sees her ancient arthritic hands as significant. It is not for the script writer to do the director's work by calling for a close-up shot of her hands, but the writer might open the scene with 'Her old hand struggled to remove the lid of the biscuit tin...' There are, therefore, two versions of a film set down in writing: the pre-production script prepared by the scriptwriter through various stages or drafts, in consultation with the producer and director. This finally becomes the shooting script for the film. After the film has been shot, edited and the final cut approved by the director and producer, a post-production script is drawn up by the production company. This post-production script is a written record of the film and contains the timings for each scene,

the transcript of the dialogue spoken in the film and terse descriptions of the action taking place in each scene.

The script of *The Sum of Us* opens with a scene from the past. That it is a scene from the past is immediately obvious from the use of black and white photography, a filmic convention that most audiences would understand as signifying the past. This is further reinforced by the use of the voice over, another convention that we are used to in film, but which might seem strained in a stage production. The change to colour clearly indicates a return to the present but the reader/audience is now ready to accept any part of the script designated as 'black and white footage' as belonging to the past. Any narrative provides for its readers/audience an orientation, an introduction to the main characters, the setting and the time. A film script has the advantage of presenting a visual orientation during the course of the opening titles. This is a convention that has become widely used since the 1960s. Although the script of *The Sum of Us* uses the running of the titles to help set the scene, it goes further, communicating certain information to the reader/audience even before the titles begin, by verbal as well as visual means. Because of the conventions of film, however, we realise that this is all part of the orientation.

What information have we gleaned before the titles have finished running and the film proper can be said to have begun?

1. This is probably going to be a script about families, a gentle film, perhaps even about love;
2. It is set in a harbourside, but unpretentious suburb (note the neighbour with greyhounds, the local pub);
3. The main character is a young man who, the script tells us, is called Jeff and is twenty-four;
4. A second character is his dad (the script tells us this, but the film shows them entering the same house);
5. Dad is interested in finding a partner. Thus the script's orientation gives a narrative image for the whole film.

Narrative image refers to the expectation of the reader/viewer as to the type of narrative to expect. A film script's orientation differs from that of a play in that it can be presented at the

same time as information is being presented through the titles, before the serious action begins. A play script needs to be more economical in its orientation. (For an explanation of narrative image, see McMahon and Quinn: *Real Images: Film and Television*. Macmillan, South Melbourne, 1986.)

### **3. Enticing the audience**

Both plays and films need to be economically viable and so both need to advertise themselves to their potential audiences. There is little difference in the need of each to create a narrative image in their display advertising. The main difference would arise from the different ways in which they have to be economically viable. A film company puts all its resources into one production which will be shown over and over again, will possibly be shown on television and rented out in video form. The producer of a play, on the other hand, has to recoup the investment during the play season and take into account the ongoing cost of paying actors night after night, paying for space in which to present the play and paying for sets, props and costumes which will only be used for a limited period. In both forms, the budget expenditure is planned against potential income. Hiring a star may increase the initial cost, but ensure a reasonable income.

It is interesting to compare the narrative image created behind the credits with that created by one of the display advertisements for the film. In raising expectations about the film, advertisements usually call upon our recognition and arouse our curiosity. They then pose an enigma, a puzzle that the audience has to solve.

How is recognition conjured up in the display advertisement for *The Sum of Us*? Firstly, we find the elements in it that we recognise. Some will recognise the stars as seen in the pictures and named in the text. Some will recognise the names of critics.

Note that the use of critics' opinions is expected to appeal to a certain type of audience. How would you describe this audience?

All the words in large type: PROUD TO BE AUSTRALIAN, WARMTH, ORIGINALITY, FUNNY, HEARTWARMING, HUMOROUS, 5 OUT OF 5, DON'T MISS IT, POWERFUL, TOUCHING are used to arouse some form of recognition in us.

What arouses our curiosity? Curiosity is aroused by the visual images. We are presented with three couples:

1. Man and woman—no problem;
2. Man and man—well, one is older, could be father and son;
3. Man and man—both young; is this one of the 'surprises' mentioned in the text?

The enigma posed by this advertisement is: what could be surprising (a word mentioned twice) about the love portrayed in this film?

How does this compare with the narrative image created by the script?

The only reference to the setting of the film in the advertisement is contained in the word, 'Australian'.

The visual images in the advertisement give much the same information as the film script. There is a young man, probably his son. There is a relationship between the son and another man. (The son's sexuality is hinted at in the script's orientation but it is obscure enough to support the film's claim to present 'surprises'.) The advertisement tells us that the film is to be about love with such words as 'warmth', 'heartwarming', and 'touching' as well as the quite clear 'A surprising comedy of love'.

Further differences between film and play arise from the need to be economically viable in different ways.

As the producer of a play has to cater for the payment of every actor for every performance, many playwrights keep the number of actors required to a minimum. Although there may be many characters appearing in a play, generally these will be played by only a few actors. Playwrights write plays in which there are only a certain number of actors on stage at one time and several roles may be played by one actor. This has become such an accepted practice that contemporary Australian playwrights like Michael Gow turn this to a virtue, in that the characters played by the one actor can be seen to be dramatically linked and this device adds meaning to the play. Rarely does the writer of a film script do this (unless there is need for identical persons such as twins) as the budget for a film usually allows for numerous 'extras' as well as different actors for each of the main parts.

A film producer will look for overseas sales and may attempt to boost these by emphasising those aspects of its country of origin that are most attractive to overseas audiences. The same can be said of a play but the ability to export the Australian scenery is far greater with a film than with a play. We might therefore expect to see far more references to specific setting in a film script than in a play. Note all the references in *The Sum of Us* to attractive aspects of the physical setting. However, is the use of the harbourside locations by the director justified on grounds other than the need to make the film attractive to an overseas audience? Could it be symbolic of hope in its bright, open, pleasing aspects, or is it just pandering to a supposed overseas curiosity about Sydney?

The camera reveals the Sydney Botanic Gardens, naval and commercial docks, and pans along Sydney Harbour, the lower North Shore and then across to the Opera House.

In making a film accessible and attractive to the largest possible audience a filmmaker may not only be searching for an investment return for her/his backers but may well be looking for the widest audience for the message the film has to convey. A decision about this can only be made after a consideration of the film's main concerns.

## 4. The film of sentiment

Samuel Richardson in his preface to *Pamela* in 1740 wrote:

If to *divert* and *entertain*, and at the same time to *instruct* and *improve* the minds of the youth of both sexes:

If to inculcate *religion* and *morality* in so easy and agreeable a manner, as shall render them equally *delightful* and *profitable*:

If to set forth, in the most exemplary lights, the *parental*, the *filial*, and the *social duties*: ...

If to effect all these good ends, in so probable, so natural, so *lively* a manner, as shall engage the passions of every sensible reader, and attach their regard to the story: ...

If these be laudable or worthy recommendations, the *Editor* of the following letters, which have their foundation both in *Truth* and *Nature*, ventures to assert, that all these ends are obtained here together.

(Richardson, Samuel: *Pamela; or Virtue Rewarded*, first published 1740. Penguin, London, 1985. Richardson's italics.)

*Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded* was a best-seller in the eighteenth century, even to the extent that Pamela motifs appeared on teacups and fans! It changed ideas about the nature of the prose narrative, being not about the noble people of the land but about a young servant woman whose resistance to her master's attempts at seduction leads to his reformation and final marriage with her. It was written as a series of letters from Pamela to her parents, and these letters were purportedly to serve as models for letter-writing. Such novels which are both entertaining and instructive and about ordinary people, came to be seen as belonging to a genre called the novel of sentiment.

To what extent can *The Sum of Us* also be regarded as belonging to this genre?

Certainly, ideas about what constitutes religion and morality have changed since the eighteenth century, but is *The Sum of Us* a film script with concerns about human values? Alissa Tanskaya describes the film *The Sum of Us* as an 'humanitarian work' in her *Cinema Papers* review, maintaining that it 'is about the meaning and importance of all sorts of families' and that it 'promotes tolerance and understanding of our differences' (Tanskaya, Alissa: *The Sum of Us, Cinema Papers*, August, 1994).

It would be difficult to disagree with this or to deny that the film has a clear moral content aimed at reaching as wide an audience as possible, through ordinary characters, gentle humour, witty dialogue and a delightful setting. Both the film and its script can be classed like Richardson's *Pamela* as a film of sentiment, not in any derogatory sense, but in the sense that it is instructive while being entertaining.

The script, as Tanskaya says about the film, is about true love, in all its varieties and also about that lack of love and companionship which we call loneliness.

## 5. What is this thing called love?

The script begins with a scene depicting love, that between Gran and her grandchildren and, even though it is only a hint in the background, of the love between Gran and Mary. This is a comfortable kind of love, the love of belonging, of companionship. This companionship is an important component of all the love depicted in the rest of the script. A second hint of the importance of love/companionship is also given before the titles start to run, when Dad seeks the bar attendant's advice about a dating agency.

There is obvious affection between Harry and Jeff as father and son. This is revealed through their teasing of each other and their knowledge of each other's habits as in the scene about the dripping shower. In one of Harry's direct addresses to the camera, we not only learn his acceptance of Jeff's sexuality but also his deep love for his dead wife. However, what is important here and what gives the film universality is that this is not just about the relationship between a gay son and his straight father but all parent-child relationships. Lives there a parent, no matter how much loved, who is not, at times, an embarrassment to his or her children?

Harry really tries a little too hard with Greg, showing him his tomato plants, encouraging him to 'think of this as your home too, eh Greg?' in a very kind fatherly manner, joking with him about his sexuality, and anxiously inquiring if Greg practises safe sex. The last straw is Harry's interrupting them in the bedroom, to reinforce his approval by asking how Greg likes his tea in the morning. All this turns out to be a bit too much for Greg and poor old Jeff is left lonely again.

This could be any loving parent; the ability to embarrass as a result of a loving concern remains the same. Perhaps Harry realises how much of the failure of the new relationship is his fault, by rushing in too friendly, too soon. The next day we find his love for Jeff being expressed in his promise to cook his favourite meal and do his washing. This love is not 'sentimental' in the modern sense of the word but is a love that exists in spite of the fact that, as each keeps telling us, they sometimes drive each other mad. As Jeff

says: 'You give me the first class shits at times, and I suppose I do you, but I don't think there's many got a father like you' (Scene 47). That it is a deep and sincere love on Jeff's part can be seen in his care of Harry after his stroke.

Jeff is looking for a lover and a companion. It is sexual love he seeks, but not only that. The scenes used to underline this fact follow Jeff's unsatisfactory evening with Greg. Jeff tells the brief story of a woman he saw on a train.

JEFF: 'Oh, the agonising pain of it all'. That's what she said. I often wondered what she meant but I suppose I knew straight away. She just wanted someone to talk to. Someone to laugh with, have a good time with, cuddle up to. Doesn't seem a lot to ask, does it? (Scenes 28–29)

This could be seen as the main concern of the film, seen in all the different varieties of love the script presents. We see it in Greg's statement upon meeting Jeff in the supermarket: Jeff suggests that Greg might have 'found some nice friend to move in with'.

GREG: I wish. I, you know, I do meet blokes but they're all after one thing. That's not everything in life, is it? (Scene 64)

Dad who rolls his eyes and frowns, obviously wants Jeff and Greg to find true love with each other and the film ends on a note of hope for at least one of the forms of love that the script deals with. Even though it is common enough for parents to want their children to be happy in love, children often find it hard to accept that older people such as parents and grandparents require love and companionship too. Another kind of love we find in the script is that between man and woman, but in this case, an older man and woman, both with grown-up children. In both cases, the children support their parents. The treatment isn't over-romantic. Harry might get down on his knees to propose to Joyce but he realises it will not be the same as it was with Jeff's mother:

DAD: Joyce. Mmmmm mmmm I can't say I'm the happiest I've ever been in my life, but I'm the happiest I can remember being for a very long time.

Joyce tells Jenny, her daughter, 'I haven't had so much fun in ages.' And the scenes between Harry and Joyce all emphasise a loving, sharing of enjoyment. After meeting Jeff poor Joyce realises only too late what a fool she had been to reject

Harry because he hadn't told her about Jeff's sexuality.

Perhaps the most poignant love in the script and the one hardest for young people to accept, regardless of sexual orientation, is that between people in the grandparent generation. Gran and Mary's story is fondly remembered by Jeff and although Harry agrees it was a lesbian relationship that was formed after the death of his grandfather, he has difficulty with the words Jeff uses, just as he has difficulty with the word 'gay', preferring his own coinage, 'cheerful'. All the same, Harry is able to joke with Jeff and Greg about their sexual activity, leading to some of the funniest lines in the script; funny because unexpected from Harry. Jeff, on the other hand, wants Harry to accept all these words as ordinary, acceptable and as part of ordinary, everyday life. Eventually, Harry does come to accept his mother's relationship with Mary as being a serious loving relationship: after his stroke, he tells the audience the sad story of their forced final parting (Scenes 68–69). It is this relationship that may be the most difficult one for young people to accept, not because it is a lesbian relationship so much as because of the age of the people involved.

To what extent does the film imbue this relationship with ordinariness and make it acceptable as a loving and companionable one?

## 6. The importance of the ordinary

How indeed does the script create a feeling of ordinariness, coupled with the unexpected and the entertaining, to make a serious point about human life and values; that we have a common need for 'true love and companionship' and that there are 'all sorts of true love without bias to age or gender'? (Tanskaya, Alissa: op cit.). The opposite condition, loneliness, as Tanskaya observes in the *Cinema Papers* review, and the film touchingly points out, 'functions without bias'.

A shot of kids playing football in a suburban backyard creates a very ordinary opening for the script. What is perhaps unexpected is that a grandmother is playing with them while a female friend watches from the verandah. In the following scenes, Jeff and Harry appear to be ordinary Australian blokes. They live in

an apparently working class suburb with its pub and greyhounds. Their jobs are ordinary: a ferry captain and a plumber. Jeff plays football. Although they cook for each other, their culinary efforts are unpretentious, 'bangers and mash', frozen lasagne, and for a treat 'a nice roast'. They drink beer and argue about the taps in the shower. Even Harry's courting of Joyce begins through a computer dating agency, not some romantic meeting, and they go to dinner at the local Leagues Club. All this ordinariness lulls the reader/audience into a sense of normality, of acceptance, and allows the script to act as instructor, promoting certain values without the reader/audience being so acutely aware that this is being done.

It is easy to empathise with Harry as he seems so like someone we know. This empathy is increased by the use of the direct-to-camera device. Rather than alienating the audience by reminding them that they are not looking at 'real life', this technique creates a conspiratorial bond between the reader/audience and Harry. This device was also used in *House of Cards*, shown on ABC television. In this series, the main character—who was completely amoral—obtained some audience sympathy by his conspiratorial asides to them. It was also used to good effect in *Alfie*, a 1960s film dealing with morals and sexuality from the point of view of a young heterosexual male (*Alfie*, film. dir. Lewis Gilbert, 1966). In *The Sum of Us*, this device allows us to look into the mind of a stroke victim, showing that the stroke has not changed Harry's personality—and Jeff's use of direct-to-camera device and voice-over during flashbacks very quickly has the audience's sympathy with him.

When, after reading the script, you view the film, you will see how the visual images in the film reinforce these ideas of ordinary life, with its views of the suburb of Balmain, supermarket scenes and those in the Botanic Gardens. The only time it seems to go a bit beyond the ordinary is in the final shot included in the script of the wide sweep of Sydney Harbour, but perhaps this too is part of the film's technique of enticing the audience to accept the film's message.

## 7. The role of the unexpected

Much has been made in reviews of *The Sum of Us* of the way it plays with the traditional Aussie male image. Reference is made to a 1975 film, *Sunday Too Far Away*, photographed by the co-director of *The Sum of Us*, Geoff Burton, and starring Jack Thompson as a shearer (*Sunday Too Far Away*, film. Dir. Ken Hannam, 1975). In this film, Thompson plays the part of Foley, a gun shearer who is involved in the shearer's strike of 1956. It deals with the camaraderie between the men and their loyalty to the union in the tradition of Australian mateship. Thompson and the actor John Ewart who played Ugly, stand at a communal washing tub clad in nothing but bath towels around their waists. As they wash their underthings their bodies wiggle to such an extent that the towels fall to the floor, revealing bare wiggling buttocks. In *The Sum of Us*, when Harry is mashing potatoes in a pot on the stove, 'his body wiggles as he stirs the pot' in just the same way as it did in the earlier film. This introduces the script/film's questioning of what is really meant by the 'Aussie male' today. Russell Crowe, as another icon of masculinity, works with Thompson in the film to undermine our national masculine stereotype (see his role in the film *Romper Stomper* and interview in 'Metro', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 June, 1995). Both these actors only reinforce the unexpected in the film; the tenderness between them is already there in the script.

The Aussie male is not the only stereotype to fall to the unexpected, as seen in the revelations about Gran's football prowess and her loving relationship with Mary.

## 8. Further reading

*The Sum of Us*, David Stevens (script of the original play from which the film was adapted), French's Playscripts available in Australia through Dominie Books, Brookvale NSW.

*Don't Shoot the Best Boy—Who Does What on the Film Set*, Shand and Wellington, Currency Press, Sydney.

## 9. Some questions and discussion topics

1. The film script gives us two examples of parental reactions to a child's revelation of his sexuality. Identify these reactions.
2. Which one shows 'tolerance and understanding of our differences'?
3. With which reaction does the script expect its audience to sympathise? Identify aspects of the script which lead you to make this decision.
4. From the *Sydney Morning Herald* newspaper article published with these notes (see below), identify one family relationship that most closely identifies with the family reactions in the script.
5. Is Harry's reaction to Jeff's sexuality 'too good to be true' or is Harry a quite realistic character?
6. To what extent does the material contained in the *Sydney Morning Herald* article support your view of the character of Harry?
7. In the script, Harry after his stroke bemoans his need for nursing and says that he had feared it would be the other way round, that he'd be nursing Jeff with AIDS. How common would you say this fear is among parents?
8. Discuss the importance of their families to young people, using evidence both from the script and the *Sydney Morning Herald* article.
9. A pool player in the Prinny bar greets Jeff as 'Baxter', with its implications for his sexuality. This is meant and taken in a friendly manner, after all it is a gay pub. However, not all teasing is as harmless as that. Why do some people harass and vilify gays?
10. Gran turned to Mary for love and companionship after the death of her husband and perhaps Jeff found this easier to accept than Harry. How easy would it be for young people to accept either of their parents turning to a homosexual relationship later in life?
11. Should one differentiate between different kinds of love?
12. *The Sum of Us* succeeds as a film script because it manages to be at the same time ordinary and surprising. Discuss.
13. *The Sum of Us* was voted the best film at the 1994 Sydney Film Festival. What are the qualities of this film script that might have made the film so popular?
14. Would you agree that the film resulting from the script *The Sum of Us* could be labelled a 'film of sentiment' in that it both instructs and entertains?
15. After viewing the film *The Sum of Us*, discuss the way in which visual images are used to reinforce the main concerns of the script.

## 10. 'The Sum of Them'

This article is reproduced by kind permission of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Catherine Armitage and Julie Delvecchio. It was first published in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 August 1994.

The film *The Sum of Us*, about a man and his gay son, highlights relationships between gay children and their parents. Coming out to their families is one of the most powerful things a gay person can do, says Richard Cobden, a Sydney barrister and a former president of the Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras. Most find it liberating, and it can be a political statement.

But coming out can also destroy families or, at least, open wounds that may take years to heal. Tales abound of sons and daughters rejected and disowned. Heather Horntvegt, who runs a counselling and support group for parents and friends of lesbians and gays, says: 'It can be quite devastating to think that all your plans for their future, getting married, having grandchildren are going to change and you selfishly think they have no right to do it.'

Another common reaction is: 'What will other people say?'. The group tries to educate parents to understand that their children in fact didn't have a choice about their homosexuality and help them to learn to love their children unconditionally.

Mr Aldo Spina is a worker with the Fun and Esteem Project of the AIDS Council of New South Wales which runs a support and discussion group to help young gay men come

to grips with their sexuality. He offers these guidelines.

- Gay people should have accepted their sexuality themselves before asking families and friends to.
- Ideally, a person should have a support network in the gay community, through groups such as Coming Out or Fun and Esteem, on which they can rely should the traditional supports of family and friends disappear.
- A family's reaction is always unpredictable. Often parents who seemed to be liberal-minded find their mettle tested when they are confronted with homosexuality in their son or daughter.
- Acceptance almost never happens overnight. 'Mum/Dad, I'm gay' is usually just the beginning of a dialogue which may take months or years; though in some families, once discussed, it is never mentioned again.

And Mr Ken Wyse, a facilitator with the Gay and Lesbian Counselling Services' Coming Out, says: 'If you are not prepared for the worst, don't do it'.

### Parents on their gay children

Four years ago, Sue Frankham, 47, found out that her son was gay. Nic, then 15, told her that he would be spending the weekend at a girlfriend's place. But, shortly after Nic left for the weekend, Sue found out that he had been staying with an older male friend. To intensify matters, Nic arrived home with a purple love bite on his neck. Jokingly, Sue asked whether his male friend had given him the bite. Much to her surprise, Nic said yes.

'He just came out and said, "I can't believe I've told you". It was a real surprise. I thought he was too young to make (such) a decision and I was concerned because I think it's a harder life. I don't think I was a parent who said, "That's wonderful, I'm happy".' But she did not try to persuade him to go straight.

About three years after Nic came out, he telephoned Sue to tell her that Lucie, his older sister, was going to call her to talk something over.

'I think I had a fair idea,' says Sue. 'Nic rang me up and said to me "Lucie's got something she's got to tell you and she's a bit nervous".'

About a week later, Lucie called her mother to tell her that, like Nic, she too had feelings

for her own sex. While Sue said that she had received no negative reactions from family and friends, she was concerned that people would think that she was a 'bad mum'.

'I guess I wondered what I'd done wrong... but now I wouldn't have it any other way. They're wonderful kids—if they were different, they wouldn't be them.'

Peter O'Shea's son and namesake, then 23, rang him from Sydney six years ago and said: 'Dad, there is something I have to tell you. I'm ... I'm ... I'm...' But the words would not come. His father suggested his son call back when he had figured out his problem. But he was not prepared for the news that his son was gay.

'I am not sure it was shock, it was something worse than that... I was probably fairly devastated actually,' says Mr O'Shea, a welfare officer in Toowoomba. 'I didn't understand it. I simply don't understand it.'

A practising Catholic, Mr O'Shea was brought up to believe that homosexuality was sinful. But the God he believed in was not bigoted, not like those people who 'judge everyone and obviously are perfect themselves.' And he realised that Peter would not need his condemnation but his understanding and support. 'He would have enough people that would be turning against him.' Acceptance took some time, but now the two have a 'quite marvellous' relationship. 'I would regard him as a good friend of mine.'

Shirley, a mother of five in her 60s from Sydney's southern suburbs, learned of her son James' sexuality four years ago when he was 20 after finding some pictures him with gay friends at a party. She and her husband were devastated.

Shirley says: 'Naturally our reaction was what have we done? Where did we go wrong? Is it our fault?' Aside from dealing with the specifics of their one-to-one relationships, many parents fear the same kind of ostracism and stigma which their children face.

Peter O'Shea, for example, discovered that 'some of the (people) I may have considered as friends were obviously not friends in the first place.'

Shirley and her husband felt better after they sought counselling and 'had it explained to us as a genetic thing'. Now she feels that her relationship with James has improved but she is not sure how she will cope if and when he gets into a permanent relationship.

## Gay children on their parents

Lucie Frankham, who came out to her parents at the age of 19, says that since she has been out, she has been able to express herself more with her family.

'To be able to be honest about something that is just so integral to my existence means that I can be honest about so much more,' she says.

Her brother, Nic, a 20-year-old research officer, had already told his parents he was gay. 'The whole nature of our relationship changed. I could start talking to (my mother) as a friend. Before that I had this other portion of my life that was really important to me.'

Peter O'Shea, 29, a journalist for the gay newspaper *Capital Q*, thought his mother would cope better than his father with the news that he was gay. It was the homoerotic photograph on the wall of the home he shared with another gay man which gave it away.

Why wasn't the picture of a woman, his mother wanted to know? And then, why did he always have gay flatmates? She was crying and upset, then she said she loved me and I said I loved her...'

Soon afterwards Peter rang his father to break the news. 'My father used to be a footballer in the VFL, I thought he would not be cool about it.' He thought his mother, a nurse, would be more likely to take it in her stride. But the reverse happened. He now has a close and open relationship with his father and, while he loves his mother 'to death, it is just that she doesn't like to talk about that issue'.

Anthony, 19, has a very different experience. The effects of telling his family he was gay were catastrophic. For eight years he agonised over his sexuality, knew he was gay but unable to tell anyone about it. His parents are Greek Cypriot and 'you never spoke about things like that'.

When he was 10 he asked his father what AIDS was; his father replied it was 'poofter disease, and don't ever mention it to me again.' From then on, Anthony (not his real name), who had his first homosexual experience at the age of 10, developed all manner of mysterious ailments, and was shunted from doctor to doctor in search of a cause and a cure. Then in the middle of his HSC last year, his mother demanded, for the millionth time: 'What is wrong with you?' This time she got her answer. 'Don't you understand, I'm gay.' With three HSC

exams to go, he was immediately kicked out of home. His mother told him: 'God created AIDS to get rid of people like you ... your sister will never get married ... we will have to change the will.' And they did.

Now he has a new life in Sydney, a good job, a new supportive group of friends, a steady relationship but no family. 'Everything from birth to the age of 18 I have lost ... my life as I know it has only been going for two years.'

Simon Cohen, 28, came out to his parents two years ago 'with great trepidation.' When his younger brother came out two years before, his father had 'virtually said (his brother) could not come to the house and he did not regard him as part of the family any more'.

Simon, a lawyer, was planning to move in with his boyfriend and wanted to share this decision with his parents. He wrote them a letter to explain. Initially, his mother was preoccupied with the fear that her sons would get AIDS and learned as much as she could about the disease in preparation for having to nurse them. But this preoccupation has passed and she is now accepting of her sons' sexuality, says Simon.

Things have been more difficult with his father. 'I continually feel him judging my lifestyle. At the same time he has made a bigger effort this time because of the awful outcome last time.'