

CATHARINE LUMBY

Professor Catharine Lumby is the Director of the Journalism and Media Research Centre at the University of NSW. She was the Foundation Chair of the Media and Communications Department at the University of Sydney. She is the author of six books and numerous journal articles. Professor Lumby was too much of a goody-goody to try sneaking into R-rated films as a teenager and she's spent much of her adult career catching up on what she missed.

AUSTRALIAN SCREEN CLASSICS

alvin purple

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ALVIN AND ME

When *Alvin Purple* premiered in December 1973, I was getting ready to enter First Form at Newcastle Girls High. Newcastle was then a largely working-class city, its economy fuelled by coal mining, steel production and the dockyards. Post-war immigration had seen successive waves of Italians, Greeks, Serbs, Croats, Lithuanians and many others come in search of jobs. An Anglo-Australian, I went to primary school with their children. In first class they still ate spicy salami and polished off leftover moussaka for lunch. By fourth class, their names began to change—Lekatsas became Lucas, Martelli morphed into Martin—and they started nagging their mums to pack jam sandwiches and vanilla slices.

In the early 1970s Newcastle, television came in two channels and one colour. I watched the Whitlam government campaign in ‘It’s Time’ t-shirts and sweep to power in safari suits. Overnight, politics was blow-dried, groovy and fond of insanely loud ties. Black and white TV has some advantages.

In 1973, Suzi Quatro’s *Can the Can* and *48 Crash* were topping the charts on a local radio station I listened to on my Sing-O-Ring radio—an enormous plastic bracelet you wore around your wrist to the beach and twisted open to tune. A poster of Quatro in a tight zip-up leather jump suit was soon to replace a simpering David Cassidy on my bedroom wall. The unbelievably raunchy Australian soap, *Number 96*, was still in the works. Mainstream

AUSTRALIAN SCREEN CLASSICS

pop cultural references to sex were largely of the British nudge-nudge school: programmes such as *Are You Being Served?*, *The Benny Hill Show*, *The Dave Allen Show* and the *Carry On* movies. In my last year of primary school a friend with bohemian academic parents smuggled in the explicit *The Little Red School Book*. We read it behind the toilet block. Never having seen an adult penis, I still couldn't understand how that tiny little limp thing got inside a vagina. I imagined the process must be something like stuffing a soft toy—laborious and annoying.

In 1973, nice girls kept their legs together and their options open. What those options were was never entirely obvious to most of us—although in my house it was made clear that a good education was *The Way Out*. Of what and to where I wasn't really sure. Lounging on the hockey field, sunning our Baby Oil-coated legs, the good girls dreamed of surfer boyfriends with peroxide-blond hair and a Sandman panel van. Actually daring to get into a panel van was a different matter. We'd all seen the bumper stickers: 'Don't Come Knocking If This Van's Rocking' and 'Don't Laugh, Your Daughter's In Here'. Girls who got into panel vans ended up pregnant and expelled. As far as we knew, they deserved it.

Women's liberation was still a distant thunderstorm gathering on the horizon. My only memory of Germaine Greer from this period is a TV interview with her talking about her marriage to a man called Paul. She got my attention because she talked about his sex appeal. I'd never heard a woman—outside the hockey field—actually admit to sexual desire. The most frustrating thing about being a bookish teenage girl with the usual desire to fit in is that you're far too self-conscious to ever crack the cool group and do the 'bad' stuff. Watching Germaine with her wild hair,

ALVIN PURPLE

fabulous legs and fuck you attitude, I remember thinking that she might just be the real exit sign: The Way Out.

Just before Christmas, *Alvin Purple* (Tim Burstall, 1973), a sex comedy and at the time the highest grossing locally made film of all time, hit Australian cinemas. It was one of a number of films, such as *Bedroom Mazurka* (John Hilbard, 1970), a Danish soft-core porn movie, and Pasolini's arthouse adaptation of mediaeval bawdiness, *The Decameron* (1971), that grown-ups were discussing in hushed tones over fondue and after-dinner mints. *Alvin* was different. We'd all seen the ads and it looked intriguing. For a start, it was R-rated. We were too young to try sneaking in but there were plenty of references to the movie in the papers and on TV. We thought the star was a spunk and the ads made it clear there was plenty of bare flesh on parade. The Alvin character appealed to us because he seemed approachable, sweet, clueless, and interested in girls. He actually seemed as hesitant about having sex as we were. I wrote 'Alvin' on my pencil case in purple Texta, with a heart over the 'i'.

By the time the TV series moved onto Australian screens in 1976, and the *Alvin* narrative was actually accessible to anyone under the age of 18, I was in a Sydney boarding school and reduced to reading Harold Robbins by torchlight. I didn't think about the *Alvin* phenomenon for many years. Then, in the early 1990s, writing my first book, *Bad Girls*, I found myself revisiting the same period, trying to understand how the various strands of sexual liberation and feminist revolution intersected and diverged in early 1970s Australia. I remembered the impact the movie's release had had and scraped up a video copy. Watching it was like opening a capsule in time. It's all there, I thought, everything I remember living through and sensing: the nudge-nudge humour, the anxiety

AUSTRALIAN SCREEN CLASSICS

about where female sexual desire fits into heterosexuality, the electricity of burgeoning cultural and political change.

With the benefit of hindsight, it struck me that *Alvin Purple* is a film which not only has a central place in Australian film culture, it's an important cultural text. It reflects and refracts so many of the cultural, political and sexual anxieties and realities of its time. It's certainly an important film in its own right. Graeme Blundell's characterisation of Alvin stands up after all these years and Tim Burstall's capacity to make a coherent feature film on such a small budget is remarkable, even if many aspects of the script and the humour are dated. My interest in this film is both in its legacy as an iconic Australian film and in what it tells us about one of the most exciting and dynamic moments in Australia's cultural, political and social history.

To put it another way: I can't find that First Form pencil case. So I decided to write this book.