

A high-contrast, black and white photograph of a woman's face. The lighting is dramatic, coming from the side, which leaves one side of her face in deep shadow. Her eyes are looking slightly away from the camera. Her hand is raised, with her fingers resting near her chin and mouth. The overall mood is contemplative and artistic.

STEPPING OUT

INFORMATION

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THE FILM

Stepping Out is a fifty minute film which explores the lives of a unique theatre group of mentally handicapped people as they prepare for their first public performance - at the Sydney Opera House. The film follows this event from its beginnings, showing the startling growth of confidence and ability in the performers, and climaxing with their triumphant first performance.

The film focuses on two members of the group: 31 year old Chris Dobbin, a dancer of extraordinary talent, and his girlfriend Romaine Grace, 21, who provides the film's commentary. Like the other cast members, Chris and Romaine have lived in an institution since early childhood. Stepping Out explores their warmly affectionate relationship, and their attitudes to each other, their lives in the Home, and their hopes for the future.

It highlights the astonishing talents and capabilities of a group of people normally hidden away from the world, allowing us to meet them not as freaks or objects of pity, but as real people in a real situation.

Stepping Out was shot in November 1979 for international television release during 1981, International Year of Disabled Persons. The production received financial support from the Australian Government, the New South Wales State Government and three companies.

The final version of the film was distilled from 15 hours of footage shot during the 3½ weeks of filming, and was edited over a 7 month period.

CHRIS NOONAN, PRODUCER/DIRECTOR, TALKS ABOUT THE FILMING

Q: Where did the idea come from?

A: It took me quite some time to overcome my own fears of meeting and mixing with a group of people I'd only ever seen before through mini-bus windows. I remember seeing a sign on the back of one bus which read "CAUTION - HANDICAPPED PEOPLE" which seemed to sum up the attitude that most of us have. My own experience of overcoming this fear of the unknown led me to think that a film could give audiences the opportunity to have a similar experience. As the film progresses, the event is seen more and more through the eyes of Chris and Romaine, until we are experiencing a personal, intimate, 'close-up' relationship with them. So we have tried to allow audiences to share their experiences, to identify and empathize with them, and to come to know them as human beings.

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- Q: How did you achieve such a feeling of closeness with them in the film?
- A: The camera had to become the eyes of someone participating in the event, and so the personality of the crew was terribly important. They couldn't just stand back and record, but had to involve themselves personally with the people they were filming. We all did become part of the event, and the film just wouldn't have worked if each member of the crew hadn't opened themselves up and cared as much as they did. It got to the point where at times we had to search for members of the crew who had got involved with helping someone with their maths or looking through a photo album. But the result was that when we were filming, it wasn't a big camera that was staring at them, but their friend Dean with a camera in his hands.

We did make some blunders, though. Chris and Romaine let us rig them up with radio microphones so that we could film some candid conversation between them from a distance. But they really hated the contraptions and felt that their privacy was being invaded. When we heard the recording back, it was a conversation about their plans to put Chris Noonan in a pot, cook him, carve him up, and eat him for breakfast.

- Q: Were there any special problems in filming the performance?
- A: From the very beginning Richard, Jane and I decided that the centre of the performance should be the backstage activity. What they were going through was at least as important as the results on stage. But it's very dark back there, and the cast and audience would have been distracted by film lights backstage, so I presented Dean with this problem. In the end he solved it by shooting with a very fast lens and rigging up a special lamp. It was the tiniest film light available - what's known as an inky dink. Tony, the camera assistant rigged up a snood for the lamp which narrowed its beam to a tiny pinprick of light. He painted eyes on the sides of its snout and equipped it with flappy ears, and it became known as "Inky" to the cast.

THE OPERA HOUSE EVENT

"Life - Images and Reflections" was a season of mime/dance performances by the Naliandrah Drama Circle at the Sydney Opera House in November 1979.

The 40-member group, ranging in age from 19 to 51, was established at the Lorna Hodgkinson Sunshine Home in Sydney by Aldo Gennaro, a Chilean therapist/teacher/theatre director who was employed by the Home. A basic script was written by Aldo and Jenny Lowe (also a

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therapist at Sunshine), and the final version emerged out of three months of drama workshops with the group. Each member of Naliandrah played a part in the performance.

The event brought together an army of people to cope with the mountain of work involved in staging the play. Residents and staff of the Home, parents, friends and acquaintances were all drawn into the operation to help with costume-making, set construction, makeup, stage management etc.

At one point, Sue Hanckel, a doctor who designed most of the costumes, had her maternity patients at St Vincents Hospital working as seamstresses in their hospital beds. Once the play's season had begun, kitchen staff at the Opera House would come down to the dressing rooms after their shift ended to help backstage. Like all performers at the Opera House, the cast were able to relax after the performance in the Green Room, where they met and mixed with members of the Australian Opera and Ballet Companies.

The cast received good luck telegrams from all over the world, and each of their performances received a standing ovation. Only four performances were planned, but tickets sold so quickly that the season was extended to seven shows.

The group received invitations to perform in other cities, but the Home's board ruled that there would be no further drama performances for at least 12 months.

CHRIS DOBBIN TALKS ABOUT HIS DANCING

I think a lot of things in my mind. I made this history long ago . .

I like to be a bird . . a butterfly . . I think of the aboriginal dance . . Movement, action . .

Japanese solo dancing; double dancing . .

The history I made is the way I feel about my past, the imagining of my self in the moment of the aboriginal dance. That was very important in the beginning.

I love my dancing because it is a gift to my friends and because it gives me respect for myself. Through my dancing I show a better life. A perfect balance. The way of the action . . a flowing . . I fly away.

I would love to work with other dancers . . to dance always further and in different ways, special ways . .

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THE SUNSHINE HOME

The Lorna Hodgkinson Sunshine Home is a residential education and training centre for the intellectually handicapped, organized along the lines of a small hospital. It is set in 3½ acres of land at Gore Hill, Sydney, and currently has a total of 193 residents ranging in age from 3 to 82. The complex includes a school, a sheltered workshop which undertakes mailing work, and an activity therapy centre for the more severely handicapped.

Most of the residents are in Sunshine because they were found to have brain damage at birth, many afflicted with Down's Syndrome (mongolism). A relative few suffered brain damage in accidents later in life, and others were admitted because they were disturbed or had a low IQ. The Home aims to provide "whole-of-life care", and few residents ever leave once admitted.

It is controlled by an 11-member board. There has never been a female board member, and there is no parent, staff, or resident representation.

The Home is financed largely through federal government assistance, and fees are also charged. There is a long waiting list for admission.

POLITICS & REPERCUSSIONS

Some 7 months after the performance (and shortly after representatives of the board saw an early cut of the film), Aldo Gennaro was dismissed without warning or explanation from his position at Sunshine. Matron Dorothy White, Aldo's immediate superior, was similarly dismissed.

Although Aldo has never been given reasons for his dismissal, one board member commented to the press that Aldo was "erratic and undisciplined". Dorothy White is currently pressing for an arbitration court finding in favour of her reinstatement.

On seeing the first cut of the film, the Chairman of the board, Mr Godden, and the medical superintendent, Dr Lochhead, both criticised the film for "an excessive display of affection". They urged that scenes showing affection between Chris and Romaine and a scene of Aldo congratulating the residents with hugs after a rehearsal be deleted. A number of parents have made similar criticisms, while others support the film's attempt to touch on the vexed question of male/female relationships for the institutionalized handicapped.

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PEOPLE

Aldo Gennaro was born in Chile in 1945. He studied drama and psychology at the University of Chile in Santiago. In 1969, he moved to New York to study Fine Arts and to take a two year course in Grotowski Drama Techniques. He came to Australia in 1971, working as an arts therapist at Gladesville Psychiatric Hospital where he directed their Christmas play "Silent Night Without Mogadon" in 1975. He worked at Sunshine from 1976, transforming their Activity Therapy Centre into a showplace of innovative arts-based therapies, and producing Christmas plays in 1977 and 78 before undertaking "Life - Images & Reflections" in 1979.

He is now working with an Australia Council grant to develop "Connexion 81", an Australia-wide program to develop creative activities for handicapped people during International Year of Disabled Persons.

From the film:

"Institutions - no matter what institution it happens to be - suppress individual creativity. Creativity is our tool to keep growing. There's no other one."

"I am no dancer myself. I cannot teach Chris to dance. The only thing I can give is just that little touch of confidence."

Chris Noonan is a 27 year old filmmaker who has worked in the film industry since he left school. He made his first film, "Could It Happen Here?" at age 16. The film won two awards, was screened on national television and shown at the Sydney and Melbourne Film Festivals.

On leaving school he joined Film Australia as a production assistant and in 1973, won one of the 12 places in the Australian Film & TV School's initial one-year director's course. There he made 3 films including the prize-winning short "Bulls". After the film school, he returned to Film Australia as a director and made 12 films including a series on India and a feature-length telemovie before resigning in June 1979 to produce and direct Stepping Out.

He began work on the film in July 1979.

"I hope that Stepping Out opens people to the notion that when society shuts the door on those who are different or unusual, everyone loses out."

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Richard Mordaunt, co-producer and film editor, was born in London in 1940. He has made over 50 films, both drama and documentary, as director and editor. Some of his most notable films include 'Sweet Soul Music' (1967), 'Voices' (1969), 'Ireland Behind The Wire' (1971), 'Seeds of a New Life' (1975), and 'Our House' (1977). He came to Australia in 1978 and is now working as a freelance editor and director.

"For me, the overriding feeling after working on STEPPING OUT is that although the central characters are all people whose lives have been severely limited, they are all capable of enormous growth and development if given the opportunity. Our job was to tell the story of how, through working with someone who understood them and was their real friend, people who had spent 20 years or more in institutions were able to present themselves to the public with a new confidence in themselves and a new vision of their place in the world. I have enjoyed the experience from beginning to end."

Dean Semler, cinematographer. Dean Semler's long career as a cinematographer has earned him a reputation as the best documentary cameraman in Australia, borne out by the many awards he has received for his work over the years. Dean worked in television for 6 years before joining Film Australia in 1970. There he worked on an enormous variety of films including documentaries, television drama, and a feature film, and both directed and shot two productions. He is now working on a number of projects as freelance director and cinematographer.

Jane Hanckel, co-producer and assistant director, and the youngest member of the crew, was born in South Australia in 1958. She became involved in filmmaking at school, and has directed, shot, and edited a number of videotapes as part of her involvement with a Community Video Group. In 1978, she completed the Professional Film and TV Production course at North Sydney Technical College and has since been working professionally as a production assistant, production secretary and assistant editor.

Romayne Grace is 21, and has lived at the Sunshine Home since she was 9.

From the film: "I'd just like to say that anyone who's been in Sunshine since they were 9 is crazy!"

"..Or when he sees me outside, he'll put his hands right around me. And you know, it really makes me feel funny when he does that. I don't think I'd give him up for anything. Not even if I was given five dollars I wouldn't give him up. He's too beautiful. In spite of what Mum says."

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STEPPING OUT - CREDITS & DETAILS

Running time: 49½ minutes

Length: 1774 feet (491 metres)

16mm Eastmancolor; optical sound.

Publicity stills, information kit, complete release script available.

Producer and Director: Chris Noonan

Co-producers: Richard Mordaunt and Jane Hanckel

Music: Keith Jarrett (from the album 'Sun Bear Concerts',
ECM Records [ECM 1100])

Photography: Dean Semler A.C.S.

Editor: Richard Mordaunt

Sound: Bob Hayes

Camera assistant: Tony Gailey

Additional photography: Richard Mordaunt

Additional sound: Annie Cocksedge

Sound mix: Gethin Creagh

Assistant director: Jane Hanckel

Researcher/production assistant: Diana Barbara

Titles: Rein de Haan

Laboratory: Colorfilm

Post-production facilities: Kiwi Film Company Pty Ltd

Sponsored by:

The Department of Social Security

The Health Commission of New South Wales

Community Arts Board, Australia Council

and

The Boots Company (Aust.) Pty Ltd, Unilever Australia Pty Ltd, and

General Motors-Holden's Ltd

with assistance from

The Creative Development Branch, Australian Film Commission

produced by

The Binnaburra Film Company Pty Ltd