



# **BIG** all at once

A STUDY GUIDE BY LIBBY TUDBALL



# Synopsis

**B**ig All At Once explores what it is like to be leaving school and suddenly having to make crucial choices about the rest of your life. This film intimately follows three different 18-year-olds as they finish high school exams, and struggle to piece together their adult identities. The three teenagers are from very different worlds, but all face the same, painful transition – the six months between high school and entering the adult world.

Beyond media stereotypes about teenagers today, *Big All At Once* gets close to its subjects – capturing the human moments in these teenagers’ lives. An observational documentary with humour and warmth, this film shows how each of its subjects is funny, brave and wise in their own way. The director said: *Big All At Once’s* heart lies in its optimism – I think it carries that essence of what life’s like – the way it can be happy and sad, all at the same time.

The team put out an ad in local street press,



## Curriculum LINKS

*Big All At Once* will have relevance to students in the final years of their senior secondary schooling and at the beginning of their tertiary education or life in the working world and wider community. The film may be used in subjects including English, personal development, life skills classes, careers education or social education studies. The development and construction of the film as a documentary can also be the focus of media studies and film analysis.

youth-based websites and high schools asking ‘Are You Turning 18?’ Through the process of hearing from myriad young people, it emerged that the film should be about what it really felt like – in a time of accelerated adulthood, when young people are expected to be instant ‘grown-ups’ as soon as they step out of high school – to cross that difficult threshold from school to the world outside.

## BEFORE watching the film

- Read what the director of the film said about *Big All At Once*:

### Director’s Statement

‘I remember being a teenager quite vividly. I remember feeling everything intensely. I could feel myself looking out my own eyes. The world had a different texture. It looked grainier than when I was smaller. I’d feel happy, then panicky. I wanted to be intimate. I would spend time in front of the mirror just staring at myself. It’s a wild period of your life. There’s a whole lot happening on the inside. Most of it you don’t want to tell anyone.

School friends died and

- things got strange - nothing like a dose of mortality to wig you out. I was gripped sometimes by an incredible feeling of being out of control - like my adrenal glands had teamed up with my hormones and were jeopardising my very core. And always comparing your identity with those around you - all those Christian pre-fects that had never heard of the bands I was getting into.
- ‘So here you are feeling like this and the powers that be are making you do exams, moving you on from school and hitting you with words like “career” and phrases like “the rest of your life”.
- People who know me very well have accused me of

- making a self-portrait which I could subtitle the “three faces of Tina.” This makes me laugh ‘cause it really wasn’t conscious - I don’t think!’
- If you are in the final year at school, ask each member of your class to write down a few thoughts about how you are feeling about this stage on a post it note, anonymously. Post your thoughts into a box, and then discuss some of the feelings that have been expressed by your classmates.
- In a small group or class discussion, talk about your responses to these questions:

- What pressures are there in the final year of schooling?
- What strategies and resources help you to get through this challenging year?
- To what extent can families help and/or hinder your experiences in this year?
- Why is it so difficult for some students, and so easy for others, to make decisions about where they might head in their career and life choices post-school?
- What messages would you give to other students about coping in the last year of school and making choices about where they are headed?



**INTRODUCING**  
the characters in the film

**Lara** lives in Sydney's upper North Shore and attends a private girls' school. Lara says: 'There's no way I could have known what life was going to be like after the HSC ... You have no idea what's ahead of you. You're petrified.'





**INTRODUCING**  
the characters in the film

Nick is a wry young man from a boys' public school who is interested in politics and wants to be in a band. Nick says 'The pressure was coming from the school, media . . . it was overkill . . . I don't think it needs to be there. People saying you're going to ruin your life.'





**INTRODUCING**  
the characters in the film

**Simona** lives in a working class suburb with her Serbian family, and retreats from their domestic conflicts into her private world of vivid pop idols and collected art. Simona says ‘How do I be the most me, how do I choose what’s my life gonna be, having to be big all at once...’

What is pepper?





# How are they all feeling at the start of the film?

## stressing out and exams

We meet the three teenagers as they embark on the intense stress of their final high school exams. Lara frantically selects the right pens to help her get higher marks, while Nick digs for books amongst his clutter of music equipment and tries not to freeze up from the pressure and hype. A few days into exams, Simona's father locks her out of home when her parents unexpectedly separate - she can't even get her books to study.

- Think and talk about the following questions about each of the young people in small groups or in class discussions

### Lara

Lara feels like she is 'still a child, but there are all these adult things happening'.

- How would you describe Lara?
- What do you think are her expectations for her future?
- What factors have influenced her expectations?
- How is she feeling as the exam period draws nearer?
- What kind of work space/study environment does Lara have?
- In what ways are the pressures on Lara similar or different from Simona and Nick?
- How do you think Lara would cope if she didn't achieve her dreams of going to university?

### Nick

Nick gives the impression that he doesn't always find it easy being at school and dealing with all the peer group pressures that come from being a young guy. He's also into 'Michael Moore rather than Eminem'.

- How would you describe Nick?

- What do you think are his expectations for his future?
- What factors have influenced his expectations?
- How is he feeling as the exam period draws nearer?
- What kind of work space/study environment does Nick have?
- How do you think Nick would cope if he didn't achieve his dreams of being a sound engineer or performer?

### Simona

Simona says she is 'a bit of a dreamer and sometimes goes into fantasy land'.

- How would you describe Simona?
- In what ways are her personality and social behaviour similar and/or different from her peer group?
- What do you think are her expectations for her future?
- What factors have influenced her expectations?
- How is she feeling as the exam period draws nearer?
- What kind of work space/study environment does Simona have?
- What particular stresses does Simona have to cope with that the others don't?
- How important is Simona's relationship with her mother?
- How do you think Simona would cope if she didn't achieve her dreams of developing a career in creative activities?



# It's time to party

## How do they do it?

### Lara

Lara returns from 'schoolies' on the Gold Coast, exhausted and wretchedly hung-over.

- Do you get the impression that Lara enjoyed the experience? Why or why not?
- How do you think she felt about being home again?
- Suggest reasons why 'schoolies' has become such a major event for so many young people after their exams end?
- What makes it so enjoyable for some and rather a let down for others?

### Nick

As soon as the HSC is over, it's time to party. Nick goes to punk parties in suburban garages where his band plays and

guys rumble like maniacs.

- How would you describe Nick's celebrations?
- How does his party time compare with how you might choose to celebrate?

### Simona

For her formal, Simona painstakingly creates a replica dress of Winona Ryder's in the film *Edward Scissorhands* – only to be left barefoot at the end of the night without a home to go back to.

- How would you describe Simona's celebrations?
- How does her party time compare with how you might choose to celebrate?
- Do you think Simona's time lived up to her expectations? Why or why not?





# Judgement Day arrives results

**Lara** gets a university entrance score of over 85, but still feels she could have done better.

- Why do you think Lara thinks she could have achieved a higher score?
- Do you think she was disappointed? Why or why not?
- What part did peer pressure play in her reaction?
- What part did pressure from within herself play?

**Simona** is delighted to get 72, 'considering it's been the most fucked-up year of my life.'

- What is she surprised about in her results?
- What is her mother's reaction?
- How important are marks in relation to her folio and interview?

**Nick** knows that creative subjects are marked down, but he dumbfoundedly stares at the score on his computer screen – 48.8. He and his parents are in shock – nobody knows what to do.

- What factors may have contributed to his low score?
- What challenges do his score give Nick in deciding his future directions?
- What courses can young people enrol in where final year ENTER scores are not so critical?

## Making future decisions

Straight away, they each have to start making big decisions about their futures. Simona is working at Toys R Us, goes to art school interviews, but is feeling very undecided about

her future. Lara, overwhelmed by feeling in limbo before university starts, visits her father who intermittently lives and works in Scotland. And Nick drifts around the house watching TV, being hassled by his mother – to find a job, to do something.

- What helps each of them get through this stage?
- What makes them happy?
- What are their connections with their family and their friends?
- What pressure do their parents put on each of them?
- What do other young people do in this limbo stage of their lives?
- Does it matter if you don't yet know what you want to do after you leave school?
- Do you think that by the end of the film, the three are closer to working out who they are. If so, in what ways?

## The next transition: from school to where?

Simona creates a radical art school project and finds a new home – in her art. But Lara grows increasingly lost at university – wondering why she followed a path without purpose or passion. As we watch them each strive to become their own adults – still deeply uncertain – we see how important it is to draw on the things that they love, as they try to work out who they want to be.





# Media studies

## Director's comments

'People ask why Lara, Nick and Simona were the particular three chosen for *Big All At Once*. Well, they all had a creative centre that made them happy. I recognized their passions. Producer Sam and I drove all over Sydney and beyond, chatting to kids. We spoke with close to a hundred 17-year-olds about their thoughts and dreams – tapping into a generation's body of knowledge. In the end we landed with the ones that related to music and/or art. There was something inside those three that I understood.'

- What are your views on the selection of Lara, Nick and Simona for this film?
- Why do you think these three were chosen?
- Are they typical or atypical of other young people at this stage of their lives?

'So I became like a travelling salesgirl, stereo blasting, singing at the top of my lungs driving down every freeway in Sydney to hang in three very different worlds. I was playing in my own band at the time, so must have arrived at the door some days looking very sleepy with camera in hand. Having three

lives in your hands is exhausting – it's an emotional responsibility. Besides becoming totally ensconced in their lives, I was aware that I had become a clue to the outside world for them. I wondered why I was exposing them to make a documentary that would be seen by other people, and I became a bit mother tiger-like in my protectiveness. It was all about representing them lovingly and truthfully. I wanted to show the frailty and ordinariness of everyday 'adult' life. At the same time I wanted to let them know that the world is weird, but it's also exciting, and that they would get through this odd period.

- Write a film review of *Big All At Once* which includes comments on the extent to which the film provides a 'truthful' view that reflects the 'frailty and ordinariness of everyday "adult" life'.

## Filming strategies:

The director says that the young people:

'... were invited to speak candidly throughout – to express their personal ideas, values, anxieties and dreams. This was part of the film's aim to avoid being voyeuristic or sensationalist, but to chronicle the time when they're taking their place in the world – from their side.'

- How successful do you think the film was in creating realistic views of this stage in young people's lives?

'I love shooting, I'm very happy carrying around something that frames life. Being a one woman crew makes for an intimate time. I felt comfortable. They felt comfortable. Some days I'd shoot for two hours and hang out with them for eight. I just went with what felt right. During the edit there was so much to think about but I remember feeling disappointed sometimes. It's just that thing where beautiful shots are irrelevant to the story and you have to let them go.'

- What do you think is meant by a being a one woman crew?
- What evidence is there that the filmmaker established a bond with the group?
- The filmmakers had to edit 120 hours of film down to 1 hour for TV. What do you think might have dictated the choices they made?
- List the different sequences in the film, and write down what each sequence made you feel about the characters and where they were at that time of their life.

'The docs I love are ones that just let people be. I am a fan of my subjects. I'm not interested in making reality TV



– this isn't to say that I don't have a perverse side – but for me, that's the equivalent of the filmmaker putting a trip-wire on the ground. I told the kids that if they said anything to me that they were losing sleep over they needed to call me pronto. I wasn't there to stuff them up.'

- Do you think the group trusted the filmmaker? Why or why not, and does this matter?
- How is the style of this documentary different from other films you may have seen about young people?
- Do you think this kind of documentary is any different from 'reality TV'? Why/why not?
- What kind of film might be made by filming a group of 3 different people you know? What central idea would it convey?

## Being filmed

Being filmed was an interesting experience in itself. Lara reflected to Tina, 'This period of my life, you saw, was chaotic, a jumble of emotions. I'll look back and remember this time vividly. How it shapes who you will become... Questioning who I was, if I was letting people see me or being someone I wasn't, questioning who I was going to become.' Simona, in her own characteristic way, saw the doco itself as 'kind of like therapy. It's made what I'm doing more exciting, important – a bit of history.' She told Tina once 'I still don't have a clue what it'll be like, but I know you can picture it. This doco is bewdy – it's your art.'

- How do you think you would react to being filmed at this stage of your life?
- How do you think it changed the lives of Lara, Nick and Simona?

## Inspirations for the film

From early on, the team watched and discussed various different documentaries, to define the style for this film. They knew the film's basic material would be *observed reality*, but wanted to make an *authored film* with its own voice. In other words, they set out to make an *observational documentary*, but with its own take on that tradition.

- Suggest other themes and subjects that might be suitable for this

kind of documentary style?

The filmmakers were inspired by, among others, Jennifer Fox's series *An American Love Story*. This series combined narrative and thematic principles, editing observational footage into self-contained stories, then layering in emotional commentary taken from retrospective interviews, so that each episode became a themed whole. Other references included Bob Connolly and Robin Anderson's notion of 'active observation' – neither 'fly-on-the-wall' nor the consciously commented presence of the filmmaker in the film but somewhere carefully placed in between – and forerunners of 1960s *verité* such as the Maysles brothers and D.A. Pennebaker, with their commitment to capturing natural moments.

- Who are some other filmmakers that make observational documentaries? Think of 3 main 'rules' that observational documentary makers usually follow

In the end, the team's take on the observational documentary is that *Big All At Once* is a series of small human moments, with enhanced mood and humour, so that the filmmaker is seen to imbue the piece with her own sense of affection and fun. The film's personal style reflects the idea at its heart – showing how identity can be formed out of collected objects and private discoveries, to create something new.

- The changes in their lives during the filming were small and subtle, not big life drama – what challenges do you think this posed for the filmmakers? Did it make the film less interesting for you?

## ...And in conclusion. What are they up to now?

Lara is in her third year of Liberal Arts at Sydney University, and is enjoying it much more. She has settled into her course and found a strong social network. 'I have future dreams, but not goals,' she says. 'I have high expectations, I want to experience everything, want to meet everybody. I don't feel like anything is holding me down.'

Nick's band is doing really well – they've recently recorded a second CD and toured around Australia. 'I've

always loved music since I was a little kid, I guess,' he explains. 'It's just part of me, part of everyone in the family. I just love it.' He's also been studying youth work at TAFE, and joined Kings Cross' Wayside Chapel as an out-reach worker with homeless people a couple of times a week. For him, 'there's people who need to be helped – and I wanna help.'

Simona is in her last year of her Fine Arts degree at Sydney College of the Arts. 'I want to be happy with what I'm doing creatively,' she says, 'so I feel like I'm connecting with a whole lot of people, not just ending up in a grandma's coffee club.' Her next step will be working out where to go from university. 'Sometimes I do get excited about the endless possibilities of the future and sometimes I don't. I want to think about it, but I don't want to drown in it. It's more a day-to-day thing,' she muses, 'like my bank account!'

- What did you learn from this film?
- What do you hope you might be doing a year after leaving school?
- If a film were being made about you, what story would it tell? How might it end?

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