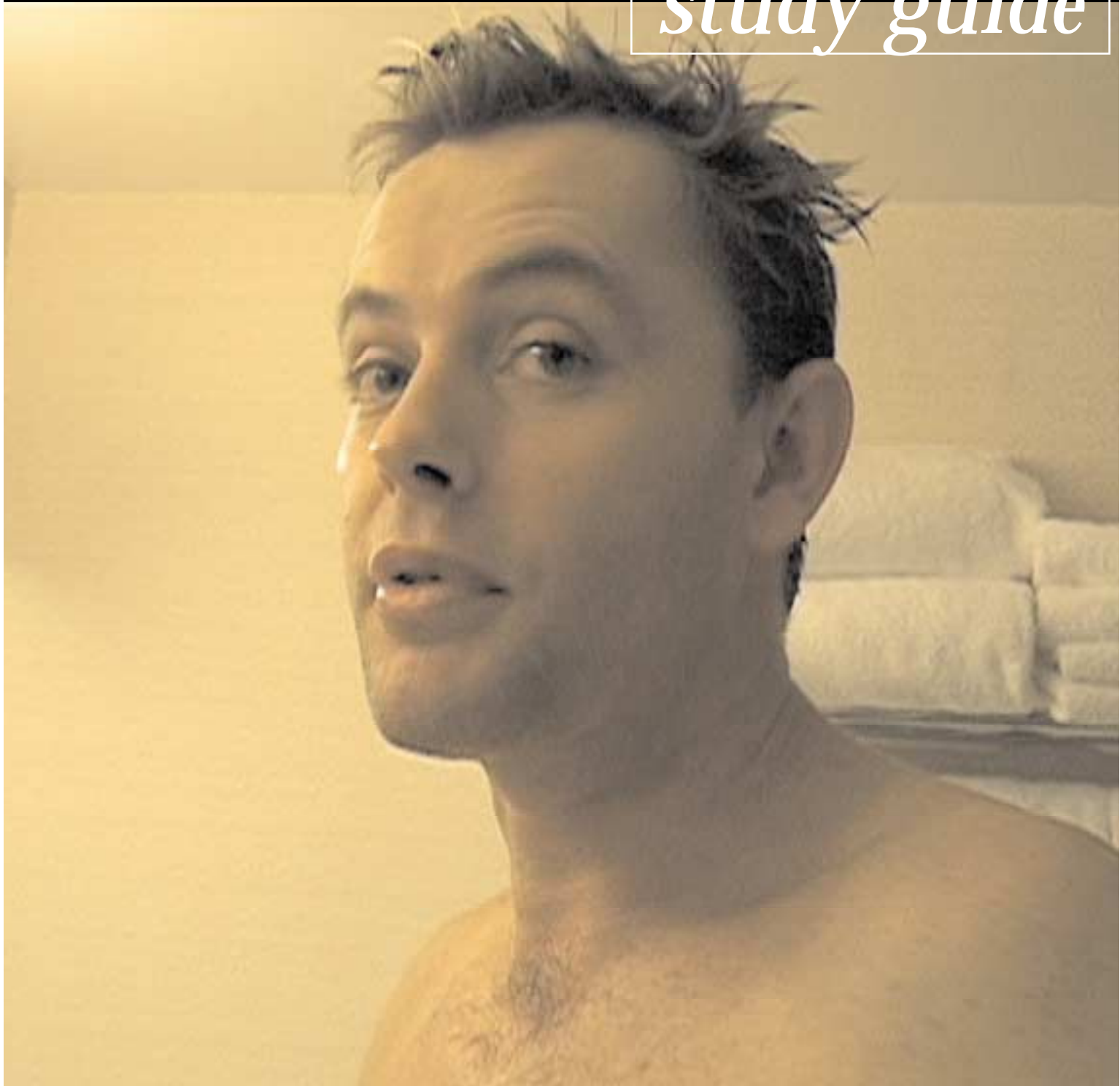


# *Killing Priscilla*

*study guide*



# *Killing Priscilla*

A STUDY GUIDE

BELINDA JENNINGS



## SYNOPSIS

*Killing Priscilla* is a behind-the-scenes documentary of the making of Stephan Elliott's third feature film, *Eye of the Beholder*. The documentary is produced by Lizzy Gardiner, a close friend of Elliott's who worked with him as a costume designer on the set of *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* and *Eye of the Beholder*. Through the eyes of Gardiner, we are taken on a personal and intimate journey with Elliott and the cast and crew, witnessing the frustration and exhilaration of film-making first hand.

*Killing Priscilla* details aspects from pre-production through to post-production as well as distribution and marketing. It exposes the reality of financing a film and the concessions and compromises that must be made to please the financiers and distributors. The documentary presents a brief account of Elliott's recent hits and flops and explores how his past successes and failures impact upon the current project.

*Killing Priscilla* is an excellent resource for teachers of Media Studies. The documentary would be an ideal starting point for studying media production and media process. The discussion questions and activities in this study guide provide an introduction to these areas. There are extension activities included that encourage students to further develop their ideas and explore the production process. Some of the activities have been structured to incorporate information technology, as this is a required component of the Media Studies curriculum.

## MEDIA PRODUCTION

This area of study focuses on the collaborative nature of the production process and the specialist roles within that process. Students should understand these areas in the media industry and also participate in an experience where they work in a cooperative manner, in specific roles, to complete a media product.

## MEDIA PROCESS

This area of study focuses on a particular medium, looking at the production process, technical aspects, required equipment, the operation of equipment, audience engagement, the roles involved in production and the conventions used.



## BEFORE WATCHING THE DOCUMENTARY

Stephan Elliott wrote and directed the smash hit, *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*. His next film was the unsuccessful *Welcome to Woop Woop*. What does the title of the documentary, *Killing Priscilla*, suggest to you about Elliott's relationship with the international hit?

- Write a paragraph that outlines how you think a film is made, from the initial idea through to the film being screened at the cinema.
- Many people are involved in the production of a film. List the jobs involved in film-making. Briefly outline what you believe is required in each of these roles.
- What do you think directing a feature film might involve? Write a list of the possible responsibilities a director might have.
- What differences do you think there might be between writing and directing a film and directing a film that someone else has scripted?
- What personal qualities might a director need in order to become successful in the film industry?
- Name your favourite director and compile their filmography. Share these in class discussion. Does it appear that directors, like actors, can become linked to a specific genre?
- What genre does *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* belong to? What about *Welcome to Woop Woop*?

## AFTER WATCHING THE DOCUMENTARY

- What genre does it seem that *Eye of the Beholder* belongs to? Give reasons for your answer.
- Do you think that this may be a reason for the difficulties Elliott experienced in financing and selling the film? Why? Why not?
- Describe Stephan Elliott's personality using a list of ten adjectives. Does he fit your idea of what qualities a director should have in order to be successful? Explain your answer.
- Stephan Elliott had to communicate with a large number of people during the film's production. What skill do you think this requires? List as many of the people that he spoke with (and their roles) as you can remember.
- Who is James Cameron? What film-making role



is he well known for? What films has he been involved with? Why does Elliott compare himself to Cameron?

- After all the difficulties that Elliott faced with making *Eye of the Beholder*, what was the final outcome when the film was released in cinemas? Did you expect this outcome from what you saw in the documentary? Why? Why not?

## STAGES AND ROLES

Every media product is the result of the collaboration of a team of people who have completed set tasks in their area of expertise. Different people work on the film at different stages of production.

- List the parts of production that were documented in *Killing Priscilla*.
- Construct a flow chart of the production process (on A3 paper) including all of the processes shown in *Killing Priscilla* and adding others that were not documented.
- What part of the production process most inspires/interests/fascinates you? Why?
- List the different roles that were portrayed in the documentary. Add these to your flow chart, indicating at what stage/s the person would be involved in the film.
- Construct a list of ten questions that you would like answered in relation to a particular role.
- Research this role using the Internet, books, the





entertainment sections of newspapers and other videos that document ‘the making of’ a film.

- When you watch films, pay attention to the credit sequence and make a note of who has performed this, and other, roles.
- Try to contact someone who works (or has worked) in that role by email, fax, telephone or mail. Ask them the list of questions that you compiled and report back to the class.
- At which point does casting occur?
- How does the initial casting process begin?
- Why is the casting important, and why is it significant that Ewan McGregor is cast as a main character in *Eye of the Beholder*?
- Does the director have a role in the casting procedure according to what we have witnessed in this documentary? Do you think this is representative of other films or not?
- When is the music added to the film? What part of production is this known as? What else occurs during this time of production?
- What is Ewan McGregor called in to do after the film has been shot?

### PRODUCTION ELEMENTS

Production elements are the technical aspects of the film. This includes sound (music, sound effects, background noise, etc.), how the camera captures the action (shot sizes, shot angles, camera movement), the framing and the lighting.

- Sound plays an important part in setting the mood. For each of the genres listed in the table below, nominate an appropriate style of music and, if possible, a specific song to be included in such a film. Comment on the mood that would be created for the audience.

GENRE	MUSIC STYLE OR SPECIFIC SONG	MOOD CREATED
Horror		
Comedy		
Romance		
Drama		
Action		

- How would you describe the music that we hear in the scene where Ewan McGregor is running down the city streets? What mood does the music create in relation to the visual footage?
- Collect a range of photographs from magazines and stick them in your book. Label what type of shot they are and what angle the photograph is taken from.
- When Ewan McGregor is being filmed on the motorbike in the snow, how does the camera capture the action (tilt, pan, tracking, etc.)? What piece of equipment was used to achieve this? How could you improvise and achieve the same camera movement without the expensive equipment?
- Collect a range of photographs that illustrate different lighting and stick these in your book with annotations.

### ENGAGING AN AUDIENCE

Every media product is aimed at a specific audience. The audience is determined by its defining characteristics, which include gender, age, socio-economic background, interests and attitudes. Once the audience is defined, the film-maker targets that audience by employing production elements in a way that will engage that specific audience. For example, fast paced editing and loud music are generally thought to appeal to a younger audience.

- Who is the audience for *Eye of the Beholder*? Why do you think this?
- *Killing Priscilla* shows some of the shoot, illustrating the music, camera angles and lighting



that were used in some scenes. Watch the sequence with Jason Priestly and Ewan McGregor. What are some of the production elements that Elliott uses to engage the audience of *Eye of the Beholder* in this scene?

- Watch a TV programme at home and watch the opening credits carefully. What is the target audience of the TV programme? How do you know this? What production elements are used to engage the audience?

#### INDUSTRY AND PRODUCTION ISSUES

Many film-makers experience the pressure, frustration and limitations that Stephan Elliott experienced during the making of *Eye of the Beholder*. Many of these limitations are due to the political structure and commercial nature of the film-making industry.

- How formulaic do you think Hollywood is?
- What evidence do you have for this based on: a) the documentary *Killing Priscilla*, and b) your own experience of Hollywood films?
- Are the producers in Hollywood willing to take risks? How do you think this affects what type of film is produced in Hollywood?
- How do the attitudes of producers in Hollywood affect the writer/director?
- How is the success of a film measured in Hollywood? What problems can you see with this as a means of determining the worth of a film?
- Why wasn't Hollywood prepared to finance *Eye of the Beholder*?
- What sort of pressure is there on Elliott to produce a 'successful' film?
- How does Elliott handle this pressure? What strategies does he employ and what is he forced to do?
- Why does Elliott comment that he is in 'film jail'?
- What budget was allocated to *Eye of the Beholder*? How was this money distributed and used? Whose 'pockets' do you think this money 'lines'?
- Mark Damon is referred to as one of 'the suits'. Who are 'the suits' and what role do they have in the production of the film?
- How do 'the suits' make film production difficult for Elliott?
- Why do you think insurance is necessary in the film-making industry?
- How do you think it is possible that money ran out on day one of the shoot? What do you think the impact of this is on the cast and crew and the overall production?
- When does the sale of the film occur in the production process? What happens if there is no sale?
- What is the final result of the film not being sold at the required time? What does Elliott have to resort to in order to finish the film?
- Elliott has included 'weird stuff' in the film. In one scene, it is 'snowing in hotel rooms'. He



comments that he thought he would be ‘told off’ in week two of production as it’s ‘not what they expected’. Who are ‘they’ and what did they expect?

- Collect articles from the entertainment and business sections of the newspaper that discuss the film-making industry. Stick each article in your book and annotate, outlining what issues are being discussed.

#### EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

• Choose one of the following scenarios to script. You may script in any genre. You, like many film-makers, may have limitations imposed on you such as you may only shoot within the school boundaries or there must be no dialogue, only music.

**A** – A package is delivered.

**B** – Someone is forced to leave.

**C** – An accident occurs.

Look at the Internet site <http://mentalsoup.net/jelkins/lawyersfilm.shtml> and go to the screenwriting link to research how to script your story for film.

- In groups of three, decide on which story you would like to film. Simulate a writing session by taking the original idea and working on the script until all group members are happy with it.
- Individually, produce a storyboard for the story.
- Come together as a group and compare your

storyboards. Choose the one you will work from; you can incorporate parts of the other storyboards if you want to.

- Determine who will fulfil each role. There should be a director, director of photography and editor in each group.
- Research your role by searching the Internet and using resources in the library such as books, film journals, CD-ROMs and videos.
- Search the Internet for tips on low budget film-making. Some sites that offer tips on lighting, using your camera, how to edit, etc. are <http://www.exposure.co.uk/exposure.html> and <http://www.exposure.co.uk/eedit/index.html>. Take notes on areas that concern your production.
- Plan the shoot. You need to consider the equipment you will require, props, costumes, the availability of actors/interviewees.
- Shoot according to the storyboard, remembering that you do not have to shoot in the order the scenes appear.
- Log the raw footage and construct an Edit Decision List, which documents what footage you want to use from your tape of raw footage and what order it will appear in.
- Edit the raw footage. The director and director of photography should still be involved in the decision-making at this stage but the operation of the editing equipment should be entirely the editor’s responsibility.





- Individually, create the advertising material to promote your film. Many advertisements for films use photomontage. Photomontage is similar to collage but uses photographs. You can either: a) collect images from magazines to use; or b) take your own photographs, depending on the time frame. Using either manual cut and paste techniques or a digital imaging programme, put the images together and add text.

- Discuss the different material produced by the members of the group and evaluate each advertisement using the following questions as a guide.

Does it target the audience of the film? If yes, how?

Does it communicate the genre of the film? If yes, how?

Describe the font used for the text and how it contributes to the style of the advertisement.

#### INTERNET SITES AND ACTIVITIES

The Internet is a fantastic resource for film production. The following sites were correct at the time of publication.

- Go to the Cyber Film School site at <http://www.cyberfilmschool.com/> and click on the articles link. Select an article from the collection that discusses the impact of new technology on the film-making industry. What are some of the issues concerning the production process due to the advances in digital technology? What impact

has digital technology had on the film-making industry? What has it allowed film-makers to do that they couldn't before? What limitations are imposed when using this technology?

- Read Morrie Warshawski's article on film fundraising. Why do you think there are web pages devoted to tips on fundraising for films, given what you saw in *Killing Priscilla*?

#### OTHER INTERNET SITES

Australian Film Institute

<http://www.cinemedi.net/afi/>

American Film Institute

<http://www.afionline.org/links/>

Famous Frames <http://www.famousframes.com/index.html>

Internet Movie Database <http://us.imdb.org/>

The Cinema Collection <http://www.gu.edu.au/gwis/akccmp/los.html>

Cinemazine <http://www.cinemazine.com/engels/voorblad/contents.html>

Film.com <http://www.film.com/>

*Killing Priscilla* is available through Ronin Films:  
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