

A close-up photograph of an elderly man's face, showing deep wrinkles and a thoughtful expression. He is looking upwards and to the left. The background is a solid orange color.

The *Prodigal* Son

A **STUDYGUIDE** BY KATY MARRINER



Introduction

This study guide to accompany *The Prodigal Son* (2006), a documentary by Tony Radevski and Tom Zubrycki, has been written for senior secondary students. It provides information and suggestions for learning activities in English, Literature, Health and Human Development, Religious Education and Media. Some of the questions and activities in this study guide will be of use to community groups and counselling services. *The Prodigal Son* won the Flickerfest IF Media Award for Most Popular Film at Flickerfest 2006.

About the Filmmakers

TONY RADEVSKI – DIRECTOR. Tony Radevski attended Macquarie University and graduated with a Bachelor of Media in Visual Production. While studying, he worked on several short film and documentaries in a variety of production roles. Radevski produced the short drama *In the Middle* and the short comedy *But What About the Revolutionary George Pocket?* His films have screened nationally and internationally, earning awards and special commendations. Radevski is currently working on documentary, drama and animation projects.

TOM ZUBRYCKI – PRODUCER. Tom Zubrycki is a writer, director and producer of documentaries, who over the last twenty-five years has developed a substantial and critically acclaimed body of work. He usually works in an observational style and his films are narrative based and character driven. Zubrycki's recent credits include *The Diplomat* (2000), *Molly & Mobarak* (2002), *Making Venus* (2002), the four part series *Short Stories* (2003) and *Vietnam Symphony* (2003). Recently he has been producing a variety of documentary projects with young filmmakers, one of which is *The Prodigal Son*.

About the Documentary

The Prodigal Son is the story of a family's journey to understanding and acceptance. *The Prodigal Son* explores how first-generation migrant parents, Alexo and Ljubica, have struggled to come to terms with their son Ted's sexuality. When Ted came out as gay to his parents, his mother insisted it was a passing phase and his father refused to speak to him. Fifteen years passed with no communication between father and son. His mother was caught in the middle and while disapproving of her son's sexuality, maintained contact through secret visits and clandestine phone calls. When Alexo discovered he was suffering from a serious illness, he decided to let Ted back into his life.



The subjects of *The Prodigal Son* are Tony Radevski's family – his uncle Alexo, aunt Ljubica and cousin Ted. Fascinated by why his uncle found it so difficult to accept Ted's sexuality, Radevski began shooting *The Prodigal Son* three years ago. His initial interest was in examining the cultural and personal values underpinning Alexo's beliefs and decision not to speak to his son, as well as considering the impact of Alexo's views on the dynamics of the family. The documentary's direction shifted when Alexo discovered he had cancer and began speaking to Ted again. Radevski's attention turned to this development in their relationship and the possibilities of reconciliation, not only between father and son but the entire family.

Coming Out

The Prodigal Son highlights the dilemmas and difficulties of being honest about one's sexuality if it is different to what society regards as the norm. Coming out is difficult given Australian society tends to view heterosexuality as the most acceptable sexual orientation.

Coming out describes the process of an individual who is gay or lesbian accepting their sexuality. This process also involves the individual telling other people the truth about their sexuality. Individuals who decide to come out, risk rejection but gain the freedom of not having to censor who they really are.

Homophobia is a fear of homosexuality. Some people may feel threatened by people whose sexual preferences are different. This fear may be expressed in subtle ways or in more overt and aggressive ways.

Using *The Prodigal Son* in the classroom > Teachers may select from the following activities to support students' viewing and close analysis of *The Prodigal Son*.

Before viewing the documentary

- Make an A4 collage of words and images that reveal your feelings about one of the following concerns:
- Family - Love - Loyalty - Honesty - Hope - Forgiveness - Reconciliation
- In a personal journal write about your relationships with members of your family.
- What are the qualities of a good parent? Discuss the roles and responsibilities of parenting. Interview a mother or a father about their experience of parenting.
- Ask a mother or a father to make a one-sentence statement about parenting. Compile the statements and as a class agree on an effective way to present these ideas as an installation.
- What are your family's beliefs? What values underpin these beliefs? Do your beliefs differ from your parents' and your siblings' beliefs? . As you have matured have your beliefs changed?
- Reflect on times when your values and beliefs may have been in conflict with those held by another member of your family. What happened? How was the conflict resolved?



- Have you ever felt overwhelmed by your parent's expectations?
- Spend time considering the following claims:
 - Our sexuality is an important part of who we are.
 - Our sexual identity should not be ignored.
 - An individual's sexual identity needs to be accepted with respect, compassion and sensitivity.
 - The development of a person's sexual identity is a complex and personal process.
- Is it difficult for parents to accept their adult child's sexual identity?
- Discuss how the media, particularly film and television portrays homosexuals and homosexual relationships. Are these portrayals honest and just?

After viewing the documentary

- Do you know the parable of the prodigal son? Read Luke's gospel 15:11 – 32. The parable is a story of rebellion, repentance and reconciliation. Jesus told the story to a gathering of the religious of the day, the Pharisees, and the people they despised, tax collectors, prostitutes and other outcasts. The parable reveals God's love for those who are ready to accept it and His rejection of self-centred righteousness. *The Prodigal Son* does not offer a literal reading of the parable. Ted is not portrayed as the sinner. Alexo is not as forgiving as the father in the parable. Nevertheless, comparing the two accounts of a father and son relationship is an interesting way to further your understanding of the documentary. Can you think of other stories that draw on this biblical text? Draw on your knowledge of contemporary novels, television series, films and songs to support this discussion. Working in a small group storyboard a short film about a prodigal son or daughter.
- Were you challenged by the story of the documentary?
- What scenes interested you the most?
- Why make such a documentary?
- Who do you think the documentary is trying to communicate its messages to?
- As a class discuss how *The Prodigal Son* promotes understanding and acceptance of homosexuality.
- Ted's decision to tell his family he was homosexual was motivated by self-respect, 'I couldn't be anything but what I am, well who I am. Can't be someone else, you know, they expected you to lie for the rest of your life. How can any person really lie for the rest of their life?' What does it mean to 'live a lie'? How important is self-respect? No one wants to 'live a lie' but what happens if our self-honesty hurts others?
- Do you think Ted's story is typical of the challenges faced by individuals who choose to be honest about being homosexual? Working in small groups, discuss the challenges for individuals whose sexual identity may not be regarded as acceptable by the society in which they live.
- What do you think of the narrator's revelation that: 'Growing up, I didn't even know Ted existed.'?
- Make a list of the key sequences of *The Prodigal Son*. Allow students to work as individuals or in small groups to create an analysis of the content, production values and purpose of a key sequence.
- Bronwyn Kidd, Flickerfest 2006 director, has claimed "*The Prodigal Son is an outstanding film. It captures eve-*



rything that's essential to good documentary – trust between the filmmakers and their subjects, candor about the topic at hand and the ability to negotiate tricky territory in order to tell an engaging story.' (Flickerfest Media Release January 25, 2006) Do you agree with Kidd's assessment of *The Prodigal Son*?

Close Analysis

TED. Ted was born in Macedonia in 1964. During the 1970s the family moved to the Sydney suburb of Mt Druitt. Ted moved out of home when he was seventeen. It was during this time that he established his independence and questioned his identity. In the late 1980s, Ted made the decision to tell his parents that he was homosexual. It was then and because of his sexuality that Ted came to be regarded as a family dilemma.

Ted is forty years old. He lives a suburban lifestyle in Sydney with Anthony, his partner of ten years. Like his parents he is strong willed and opinionated. Ted's temperament has enabled him to develop a levelheaded and understanding perspective of his parents' response to his homosexuality.



- What does *The Prodigal Son* reveal about Ted's relationship with his parents?
- Ted lives in the suburbs and his parents off the land. What do these choices reveal about their essential differences?
- How have Alexo and Ljubica influenced Ted's sense of self?
- What does *The Prodigal Son* tell us about Ted's need to be a part of his family?
- Alexo's boundaries of understanding and acceptance are obvious but what are the limits of Ted's understanding and acceptance?
- 'Every time you rang to speak to her, he'd abuse you and hang up. Whenever you went to a wedding, he'd abuse you, walk away. Whenever you went to a christening he'd abuse you and walk away again.' 'You keep thrusting yourself out there making the man realize you're there, you're not going anywhere. It is your family you were born into this, you're not going to just disappear.' Discuss Ted's description of Alexo's hostility and of his persistence in the face of such rejection.
- How does Ted explain his father's decision to see him?
- Ted is optimistic that his relationship with his father will strengthen and that Alexo may accept Anthony. Is he overly optimistic?
- Would Ted's story be any different if he was part of an Anglo-Australian family? Ted speaks of Australian society as being accepting of his homosexuality. Ted claims that had he been raised in Macedonia he would be 'a quiet little closeted man', living 'the old way'. What do you think of his perception of Australian society as tolerant and permissive?



ALEXO. Alexo grew up in Prilip, north-east of Macedonia. He met Ljubica when he was seventeen and she was thirteen. After four months, Alexo's family brought the relationship to an end. His mother and sister disliked Ljubica and believed her family was too poor to be associated with them. Alexo enlisted, completed his National Service and upon his return home was forced to marry another woman, one his mother and sister found more suitable. Their marriage was far from happy. A chance encounter with Ljubica convinced him that their love was strong. Alexo left his wife and their two children to begin again with Ljubica. He was twenty-nine and she was twenty-three.



- What is your opinion of Alexo?
- 'I am disappointed.'
'He hasn't got nothing. His life is – to me, them people is a like dead people.'
Why does Alexo feel like this? Discuss Alexo's resentment and bitterness.
- Alexo regards his son's sexuality as unnatural, 'But my son, he doesn't know what is he. I think that's stupidity.'
What are the boundaries of Alexo's understanding of Ted's sexuality?
- Why do you think Alexo finds it so difficult to accept his son's sexuality? Is it a matter of love or embarrassment?
- Cultural beliefs are often spoken of in a positive sense as the ties that bind, confirming who we are and what we value. In Alexo's case do his cultural beliefs blind him, compromising his ability to see the importance of his relationship with his son?
- Given Alexo's family's refusal to acknowledge his love for Ljubica, are you surprised that he was not more understanding of his son's right to make his own decisions?
- Of his uncle, the narrator claims, 'my Uncle, Tetin Alexo, was always someone who commanded respect, so there was little room for disagreement.' As Alexo struggles to start the car, the narrator observes, 'My uncle was used to getting his way.' How do these comments influence your acceptance of Alexo?
- Alexo visits Ted's home for the first time to celebrate his seventy-fifth birthday. As Ted prepares for the visit what do you learn about his relationship with his father? When Alexo arrives, he looks around Ted's home. His remarks are quite negative yet Ted responds to his father's criticism in a positive way. Consider Alexo's reaction to the gift of shirts, 'I'll wear them till I die.' Spend time discussing all that this visit reveals.
- The narrator asks Ljubica about what would have happened if Anthony was present. Her response is honest, 'Alexo wouldn't have come.' What does her answer reveal about the dimensions of Alexo's acceptance of Ted and his choices?

LJUBICA. Ljubica was born into a poor family in Macedonia's capital city, Skopje. As the eldest child she was expected to help raise her eight siblings. Ljubica was forced to marry a Serbian man who was a family friend. The marriage was an unhappy one and Ljubica was often beaten by her husband. After four years of marriage she made the decision to bring an end to their abusive relationship.

- 'If I had to describe my Aunt, Teta Ljubica, what can I say? She's a devoted housewife and one of the most deter-



mined people I know.'

What moments of *The Prodigal Son* reinforce the narrator's opinion of his aunt's strengths?

- 'That's how it is. A home without a wife is messy.'
- What moments in *The Prodigal Son* suggest Ljubica would like nothing more than to see Ted with a wife and a couple of kids?
- Ljubica while more accepting of Ted, essentially believes what he is doing is wrong and that he should behave like a normal man. She does not understand her son's sexual identity. Consider her disbelief, 'If you asked me why they behave this way, it's because they're stupid, mad. Why do they do it? It doesn't have to be like that. He could be straight and he should be.' She dismisses Ted's sexuality as a passing phase. What does this reveal about the boundaries of her understanding?
- 'My Auntie wasn't allowed to see him.'
- How has Alexo's authority affected Ljubica's relationship with her son?
- 'I had to fight. I fought with both of them. I had to fight both sides.'
- How has Alexo's failure to accept his son's sexuality and Ted's honesty about his sexuality affected Ljubica's role of wife and mother? Is Ljubica still caught in the middle of it all?
- Ted and Anthony take the opportunity to visit the farm when Alexo is in hospital. This is a complex and revealing scene given Ted and Ljubica's comments to the narrator. While Ljubica is welcoming, she also makes it clear to her nephew that while she respects Anthony as a person she is only pretending to like him. What conclusions can you draw from this scene?

ALEXO AND LJUBICA

- What impressions do you develop of Alexo and Ljubica's life together and of their love for each other?
 - Has Ted's homosexuality affected Alexo's and Ljubica's relationship?
 - What do Alexo's and Ljubica's comments reveal about a parent's aspirations and expectations?
 - Alexo and Ljubica have lived in Australia for just over thirty years. Alexo chides Ljubica for not speaking English as fluently as she should. Ljubica resists Alexo's criticism, defending her right to speak 'my language'. Do you find Alexo's criticism odd given his reluctance to move beyond his own conservative beliefs?
 - 'Fifteen years of not talking to each other has been not easy for any of us. So I think we all want to forgive and forget and just move on.'
- This is how Ted feels but is it the truth of Alexo's and Ljubica's feelings?

ANTHONY. Unlike Ted's parents, Anthony's parents have always been accepting of his homosexuality. Anthony speaks of knowing from the beginning of his relationship with Ted that they were 'sort of ... destined to be together'. He provides Ted with endless support and although he finds Ted's parents' attitude difficult to understand his commitment to Ted has not wavered.



- What does *The Prodigal Son* tell us about Ted and Anthony's relationship?
- The filmmaker draws our attention to Anthony sitting alone in a hospital waiting room while Ted visits his father. Later when Alexo is celebrating his seventy-fifth birthday, Anthony is expected to leave his home and not return until the celebrations are over. How does Anthony handle his exclusion?
- In most cultures the word marriage refers only to a union between a man and a woman. Anthony and Ted have been together for twelve years. What moments in *The Prodigal Son* confirm their love and commitment?
- Alexo speaks of hating Anthony 'so much I could kill him'. How do you react to Alexo's hostility? What does his anger reveal?
- *The Prodigal Son* closes with the statement, 'Six months have passed and Alexo is yet to see Anthony. Ted remains determined that they should meet.' What does this claim leave you considering?

Production Values

- Use a table to record details about the production values of *The Prodigal Son*.
- Examine the narrative structure of *The Prodigal Son* and consider how the documentary tells the story.
- Did you feel as if you were part of the drama as it was unfolding?
- What expectations does the opening create? How are you positioned as a viewer?
- Examine the way the subjects of the film interact with the filmmakers.
- How do the filmmakers ensure the audience engages with and responds to Ted, Alexo and Ljubica?
- How do the filmmakers establish the context of the story and provide us with the necessary background information?
- *The Prodigal Son* is a short documentary. Its running time is twenty-seven minutes. As a class discuss the demands of crafting such a format.
- *The Prodigal Son* is an observational documentary. Use *The Prodigal Son* to discuss the qualities of this type of documentary.
- Consider the use of different settings such as Alexo and Ljubica's farm, the hospital, Ted and Anthony's home and explain what each setting contributes to the telling of the story.
- What is the role of the narrator in *The Prodigal Son*?
- Examine the filmmakers' use of photographs of family and in particular of family celebrations.
- For Tony Radevski the most advantageous and challenging aspect of *The Prodigal Son* was the fact that the subjects of the documentary are family. While it allowed for honest responses to many confronting questions, it was an emotional experience for Radevski as he witnessed and recorded intimate and significant moments in the lives and relationships of his family.
As a class discuss the advantages, challenges and responsibilities of being in such a situation.
- What images and symbols are used in *The Prodigal Son*? What do they suggest about the filmmakers' purpose? How do they add to our understanding?

- The filmmakers have not drawn on the stories of Alexo's and Ljubica's previous marriages and Ted's brother while mentioned is not a participant in the story. Should these gaps have been explained?
- The director is responsible for the creative vision of a film. Write the director's statement of intention, explaining the documentary's focus, purpose, inspiration and directorial choices.

Extended Responses

- *The Prodigal Son* offers us an insight into someone who lives their life from a different perspective.' Discuss.
- What does *the Prodigal Son* tell us about prejudices within families and the damage that they cause?
- 'Ted's story is one of reconciliation and suggests what is possible.' Discuss.
- 'While *The Prodigal Son* is primarily a personal story, it is also an important social document.' Do you agree?
- '*The Prodigal Son* narrates a journey of strong emotions.' Discuss.

Going Further

- Work in a small group to create a media production that tells the story of a relationship between a parent and their adult child.
- Create a class mural that offers a response to the ideas explored in *The Prodigal Son*.
- Throughout Australia organizations exist to support and counsel individuals who are gay and lesbian. Many of these organizations also work with their family and friends, as well as educate the wider community about homosexuality. Research the work of one of these organizations.
- Use the Internet to find stories of individuals who have come out. Teachers may find it useful to visit these sites beforehand to assess their suitability for use with particular year levels.
- Collect a range of newspaper articles about the issues facing homosexuals in contemporary Australian society. Discuss the issues. Draw conclusions about the role of the media in influencing community perceptions about these issues.
- Interview a range of people to discover their view of same sex relationships. Present your findings to the class in the form of a videotape, audiotape or written report.

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