

Father and son film as good as the sum of its parts

by Brent Hartinger
Special to Q-Notes

When Australian David Stevens first wrote his gay positive play, *The Sum of Us*, he never expected it to be produced, much less made into the motion picture currently playing theaters nationwide.

To write the play, Stevens says, "I locked the door, and I let my heart, mind and typing fingers take me where they would." But because they took him to an intimate story about a gay man, his gay-positive father, and their dual search for love, Stevens "accepted the fact that *The Sum of Us* would never be performed."

Since the play was so personal and potentially controversial, Stevens, an Oscar nominee as the co-screenwriter of 1979's *Breaker Morant*, was reluctant to let anyone even read the work. But when his US agent wanted to see examples of his other work, he showed him the play.

"I was safe," Stevens says. "If it wasn't going to be [produced] in Australia, there was no chance it would be done in the US."

To Stevens' surprise, within a week that agent had found a home for the play. After that initial Los Angeles run, the play eventually made its way to New York. Along the way, the play found a champion in the form of theater director Kevin Dowling.

"Immediately after reading the play, Kevin flew out to see me, and he bought the stage and screen rights the next day," Stevens says. "He's been the play's best friend ever since."

From the start, Dowling saw the play as a movie, with himself as the co-director (with Geoff Burton). But initially, Stevens resisted the idea of re-writing the play into a movie.

"I didn't know how to handle, in cinematic terms, all the plot points in the film," says Stevens.

Stevens — who says he is pleased with the finished product — was right to be concerned. The resulting movie plays very much like a film of a play, rather than a movie. It has lots of dialogue, not much action, and a surprisingly predictable plot.

Still, the movie portrays what may be filmdom's most gay tolerant father. Harry

Mitchell is so accepting that he even buys his son gay porno magazines. And he's so determined to help his son, Jeff, find true love that he even walks in on him in bed in the heat of passion with another man to offer a few words of encouragement.

"I knew Harry would be a contentious character for some," Stevens says. "But I have met such fathers." Part of the reason he wrote the play, he says, is to show that such gay affirming parents do exist.

"Harry is a simple guy who is pretty happy with his life," adds Jack Thompson, the well known Australian actor who plays the role. "If only he and his son could find companions."

The film is also unique in that it offers a non-stereotypical gay character in Jeff, a rugby playing plumber who still lives with his father and is determined to make a life for himself of quiet domesticity (despite his notoriously bad luck with men).

"I didn't want to write a stereotypical 'gay' character, or a character who was part of the 'gay scene,'" Stevens says.

"I met several 'Jeffs' in Australia, young men who were happy with their social milieu. They wanted to be accepted for what they were within their own domestic life. They didn't want to cut themselves away from family and friends and find a new life in Sydney or Melbourne."

The part of Jeff is played by Russell Crowe, the handsome Australian actor who made a strong impression as a vicious skinhead in 1992's *Romper Stomper* (and also appears in the current Sharon Stone western *The Quick and the Dead*).

"Russell was really an eight year old kid in a 28 year old's body," Dowling says. "He's very sweet." Indeed, his sensitive performance is one of the best things about the film.

While the movie's pro-gay message is sometimes a little heavy handed, it is a well intentioned denunciation of homophobia. Better still, for once homosexuality is not presented as either a "political" issue or as the side light of some heavy AIDS-themed drama. Gayness is presented as a simple matter of relationships: love and sexual relationships

talk to his parents about his homosexuality," says John Polson, who plays the character of Greg. "Most of the gay people I know are just ordinary people who are attracted to the same sex. I believe that is one of the great strengths of this film — this it is about 'normal' people."

Initially, the film was to be a joint venture between investors in both the United States and Australia, but when the American financing fell through, the movie became, except for its American director, a completely Australian production.

This was fine with Stevens. When he first learned the play was to become a movie, he thought to himself, "For a movie, they'll want it set in America." Fortunately, he says, "my 'love song for Australia' was to remain that, with all its slang and dialect and specific cultural attitudes."

Part of the film — told in flashbacks — involves the 40-year relationship between Jeff's grandmother and her lesbian lover.

"The story of the grandmother and her girlfriend...is my grandmother," Stevens says. Other details in the movie — like the encounter with a drunk woman on a train — are also autobiographical. "I am not a young writer, but *The Sum of Us* is what I know."

Still, Stevens says, much of the rest of the movie is fictional. "I am not a 24 year old rugby playing plumber, and I certainly never had the relationship with my father that Jeff has with his."

For director Dowling, the message of the film is simple: "Whether straight or gay, familial or romantic, love is love."



Jeff (Russell Crowe, right) and Greg (John Polson) test the romantic waters in *The Sum of Us*

between people of the same sex, and family relationships between gay people and their relatives. *The Sum of Us* is about "family values" — Australian style.

"I certainly have no wish to preach to the converted," Stevens says. "What I want people to feel when they see the film is to have a damn good time. And perhaps come away feeling they know just a little bit more about the human experience. Most of all, I want them to hear a love song."

But while Jeff's father in the film is very accepting of his son's homosexuality, the parents of Greg, Jeff's love interest, are anything but loving.

"Greg is just an ordinary guy who had a suppressed upbringing and couldn't really

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