

Graeme Blundell on *Alvin Purple*

Graeme Blundell introduces *Alvin Purple* at Big Screen, Darwin, 2008. Reproduced on australianscreen with permission.

Now it's my pleasure to briefly introduce *Alvin Purple*, the sex comedy made 35 years ago, in what now seems like a parallel universe.

It's a movie that outraged critics and wowsers with its refreshingly dimpled naked flesh, and that was also seen by more than 10 per cent of Australians and kickstarted the film revival of the 1970s.

Alvin Purple was the direct result of a change in censorship laws in Australia, allowing the public exhibition of once-banned movies.

The new 'R' rating meant films could be restricted to people over 18 years. Cinemas were quickly flooded with cheap imported movies like *The First Nudie Musical*, *Swedish Fly Girls* and *Trader Horne*, a jungle sex comedy with nudity, unbridled sexism and bad acting.

The naked bedhopping made Australian film distributors squeal with pleasure. As did *Alvin Purple*, directed by the late Tim Burstall, and starring – in a great deal of undress – nearly every major actress in this country, when the movie was released in 1973.

Alvin was a character frozen in an adolescent dream of an irresistible youth, and a whole host of perpetually available and invariably beautiful women. Invariably naked women, it must be added. There is was: the premise, the story, the hook, the joke. One hundred minutes of joke.

But *Alvin* was a 'runaway success', a term that also described his sex life, as journalists loved to point out. The movie's promotion became an excuse for every conceivable pun. 'The girl on the couch talked and talked and talked – but did it', said one of the first newspaper advertisements. 'The body painter brushed it all aside – but did it. Even Abigail did it.' Photos of my naked buttocks bore the tag, 'No end in sight'.

Within days of its release there were queues outside the cinemas spiralling around the blocks in Melbourne where it first screened. Soon the posters trumpeted 'The country's doing it for Alvin'. After five weeks more than half a million people had seen the movie in 20 cities around Australia. 'We've *come* of age' quickly became a tired tabloid joke about the movie's success and what it meant for the film industry.

When it hit the suburban cinemas there was a poster of me nuzzling a naked woman's shoulder, her head arched back in pleasure. 'Everyone's "Doing it for Alvin" at Balwyn!', it read.

A speech balloon squirted from my thin mouth – 'After 11 months in Melbourne, I'm still going strong!' – and a black band across the actress's breasts read 'Still *busting* all records'.

I was promoted as Australia's 'first streaker', the 'new leader of the comedy revolution', and the actor who 'pushed "Down Under" up into the sexy seventies'.

But *Alvin Purple*'s success sent reviewers away shrill with scorn, hysterical with political rage and contempt. 'How trite, how culturally inexact, how pointless!' they cried from the walls of their High Art castles. 'Above all, how popular!'

I was certainly popular. 'Show us yer bum', beaming faces started to say when I shopped for cornflakes. Elderly women pinched me; the younger ones purred and stroked.

In bars, men were slyer: 'What's Abigail really like, yer know what I mean?' Or I'd hear 'Hello, Alvin' when I passed women in the car park. People shouted at me from cars, ran supermarket trolleys at me, and police turned a blind eye to the occasional speeding infringement. 'Don't do it again, Alvin', they say, getting me to autograph whatever they could find in their cars.

But the early seventies had become the sexual era everyone wanted to be part of, and I was a strangely visual comedic symbol, embarking on a lifetime of ambivalent communion with my public image. Which I still do to this day.

Enjoy the movie.

– Graeme Blundell