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## CHARACTER MAP

### Paula D'Amato

Married to Nik. A nurse, mother of three young children. Passionately devoted to husband. Supports him during police investigation.

### Nik D'Amato

Paula's husband. Gives Valerie a lift after car accident. Throws shoe into lantana after Valerie runs away from him.

### Jane O'May

Separated from husband, Pete. Having an affair with Leon. Finds Valerie's shoe and reports neighbour, Nik, to police.

### Pete O'May

Estranged from Jane. Coincidentally meets Leon in a bar. Supports Jane during investigation into Valerie's disappearance.

### Mystery Man

Eats at the same restaurant as Claudia. Collides with Leon while jogging.

### Leon Zat

Policeman -- Detective Sergeant. Married to Sonja; father of two boys, Sam and Dylan. Suffering a classic 'mid-life crisis'. Having an affair with Jane. Investigating the disappearance, possible homicide, of Valerie.

### John Knox

Dean of Law. Married to Valerie. Also grieving over their daughter's death. Initially a suspect in his wife's disappearance.

### Claudia Weis

Policewoman -- Senior Constable. Leon's partner and friend. Supports him, but disapproves of his affair.

### Sonja Zat

Leon's wife; mother of his children. Unhappy in marriage and seeking counselling from Valerie.

### Valerie Somers

Psychiatrist; counsels Sonja and Patrick. Daughter, Eleanor, murdered two years before. Married, unhappily, to John. Victim of tragic accident.

### Patrick Phelan

One of Valerie's clients. Having an affair with a married man. Valerie suspects him of having an affair with John.

## INTRODUCTION

*Lantana* is a psychological drama that explores the vulnerabilities and strengths that underpin contemporary relationships. Its complex, interwoven plot examines four marriages within the context of a missing person's investigation, each one of which is dealing with its own specific challenges and heartaches. The film is 'part mystery, part thriller and part journey through the labyrinth of love'.<sup>1</sup>

*Lantana* was produced by Jan Chapman and directed by Ray Lawrence, and was only Lawrence's second feature film, the first being the quirky adaptation of Peter Carey's novel, *Bliss* (1985). Despite the acclaim of this film, Lawrence returned to his lucrative career in advertising, directing television commercials, while he waited for the next engaging project. *Lantana*'s screenplay was written by Andrew Bovell and adapted from his stage play, *Speaking in Tongues*, which was first performed in Sydney in 1996. When Lawrence saw the play, despite its theatricality, he recognised its filmic potential and he, Chapman and Bovell collaborated closely on the ensuing adaptation.

Lawrence gathered together a talented ensemble of Australian actors, including Anthony LaPaglia, Geoffrey Rush and Kerry Armstrong. The casting represents an effective balance between well-known 'names' with an international profile and locally based actors often playing 'against type'. With an evocative musical score by well-known songwriter, Paul Kelly, and stylish cinematography by Mandy Walker, the film is a beautifully realised production with a distinctive Australian quality.

*Lantana* was the most successful Australian film of 2001, both commercially and critically, winning seven of the major Australian Film Institute awards: Best Film, Best Director, Best Actor, Best Supporting Actor, Best Actress, Best Supporting Actress and Best Adapted Screenplay. It premiered at the 2001 Sydney Film Festival and was also screened at the Melbourne and Brisbane Film Festivals, before its general Australian release in October of that year. It was subsequently showcased at the Toronto International Film Festival where it received rave reviews: '...this flawless Australian masterpiece...is a sublime achievement, understated in its cinematic direction, a work in which the substance of character rises to the top'.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Bovell, *Lantana* Screenplay, Currency Press, Sydney, 2001, p.11.

<sup>2</sup> P. Fischer, *filmmonthly.com* <http://www.palace.net.au/lantana/reviews.htm>

## BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

*Lantana* is set in the present in the familiar urban landscape of Sydney. The context will be immediately recognisable to Australian students and, as such, a study of the text does not require a great deal of background information.

### Sydney

Sydney is the largest city in Australia, the capital of New South Wales, and the site of first white settlement in this country. It is a sophisticated metropolis with a population of approximately four million people. Its already high international profile was further enhanced when it hosted the very successful 2000 Olympic Games. Intensive media coverage showcased the spectacular natural beauty of the harbour and familiar icons like the Sydney Opera House and the Sydney Harbour Bridge. Sydney's suburban sprawl is extensive. Like any large city, there are attendant social problems and there is reference, in the text, to illicit drug trafficking. As a policeman, Leon often deals first-hand with the downside of urban living.

### Australian Society

The characters depicted in *Lantana* represent a cross-section of Australian society and, collectively, their experiences encompass a broad and detailed portrait of Australian life. As a senior policeman, supporting a family, Leon falls into the medium socioeconomic range. He and Sonja live in inner suburban Sydney in a renovated Victorian cottage. Jane, Nik and Paula live further out in the suburbs. The fact that there is a vacant block opposite their house overgrown with lantana suggests a less built-up neighbourhood. Jane's house, a conventional brick veneer, towers over Nik and Paula's small bungalow. It is evident from their house – which is modest and not particularly well maintained – that the young couple do not have a great deal of disposable income. This is further illustrated by Jane's reference to their precarious financial state. Nik is unemployed and looks after his youngest child at home. Paula's income as a nurse supports their family of five. By contrast, John and Valerie represent the professional middle class. The joint income of a senior academic and a psychiatrist delivers all the trappings of an affluent lifestyle: a beautiful architect-designed home in a

North Shore bush setting complete with coastal view, the opportunity to dine out regularly, and so forth. They commute into the city on a day-to-day basis, as do many who live in Sydney's outer suburbs.

*Lantana* also depicts a postmodern cultural landscape and explores the way in which traditional institutions, such as marriage and family, are being reviewed. It questions the relevance and viability of the conventional frameworks of the past, and suggests that if these are to endure they must be sustained by certain core values. The traditional institutions of marriage and the nuclear family are not inviolate, nor do they have a monopoly in terms of producing successful relationships. The film demonstrates that these structures will not survive simply because they have done so up until now. *Lantana* contrasts nuclear families, whose children range from preschoolers to teenagers. Sonja and Leon, Nik and Paula may be at different stages of parenting, but their lives together are based on a concept of community that transcends the individual. We also see couples without children, though even here there is no set model. Whereas John and Valerie's childlessness has come about through tragedy, Jane and Pete's may simply be a lifestyle choice. Finally, the alternative of gay love is touched on in the film. None of these options are presented as being inherently preferable; the only value judgments being made are on the basis of the commitment and particular qualities that each party brings to the relationships.

## Lantana

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, lantana is 'a genus of tropical shrub with small colourful blooms that hides a dense, thorny undergrowth'. It grows profusely around Sydney. Within the text, lantana is employed as a metaphor for the intricate web of relationships explored throughout. The lives of eleven individuals connect and intersect in a complicated fashion, evoked at the outset by the epigraph promoting the drama: 'It's tangled'. The motif also represents the profound complexity of love itself: its possibilities, its permutations, its dense emotional threads. The film examines issues such as betrayal, loyalty, obsession, desire, suspicion and jealousy, and provides few easy answers to the question of how people can love happily. Like the lantana scrub, love is beautiful, fragile and dangerous. In adapting his original script for the screen, Andrew Bovell decided to find a new title that 'symbolically...gave the sense of a new beginning'. He explains:

To me the lantana vine visually manifested the inter-weaving and mysterious nature of the story I was trying to tell. It's an impenetrable vine with twisted and entangled branches that conceal a dark interior. It's covered in exquisite and delicate flowers but when you reach in to pick one, your hand is cut to shreds by hundreds of tiny thorns. These qualities find their expression in the structure of the story.<sup>3</sup>

Throughout the text, the image of lantana keeps reasserting itself. A common thread is the way in which lantana hides secrets: the mystery of the woman's body at the beginning, the children's game of 'hide and seek', and Valerie's shoe. When Jane is looking for the latter, she hides from Nik in the thick undergrowth of the vine. Ultimately, when the mystery of Valerie's disappearance is resolved, the lantana yields up its secrets as, literally, her corpse is winched up to safety.

## GENRE, STRUCTURE & STYLE

### Genre

*Lantana*, like many contemporary films, is a multi-generic text. Not only are several genres combined, it is also worth noting the way in which the text repeatedly and skilfully shifts focus. Audience expectations are foiled as different elements are synthesised to create a complex whole.

*Lantana's* opening suggests a conventional thriller. The disturbing beginning – with its blackouts, sinister music, claustrophobic sense of tragedy and, of course the bloodied lifeless victim – establishes the fact that here is a mystery that needs to be solved. However, the film quickly evolves into an acutely observed character study, a taut drama, scrutinising contemporary marriage. Four relationships are put under the microscope and the various issues that each couple confront come to the fore. We are introduced to Leon and Sonja, whose marriage is under threat: Leon is having an extramarital fling while his wife, who does not know of his infidelity, is seeking counselling. Her therapist is Dr Valerie Somers whose own relationship with her husband, John, has been profoundly compromised by the tragedy of their young daughter's murder two years before. Two other couples, Jane and Peter, and their neighbours, Nik and Paula, are also drawn into the narrative. The focus, at this stage, is the emotional dynamic between the protagonists. When Valerie disappears on

<sup>3</sup> Bovell, *Lantana* Screenplay, p.10.

her way home from work one evening and Leon is assigned to investigate the case, the film reverts to a missing person's investigation, though it still retains its introspective edge. The familiar elements of a police drama – interrogations, follow-up leads, a classic denouement (disentangling of the plot) with the suspect confessing the truth – are all incorporated into the meld. However, there is also a second denouement that ties up all the emotional threads; the closing montage illustrates this well as it presents us with the respective outcomes of the key players.

## Structure

Structurally, *Lantana* is complex. In writing the script, Andrew Bovell has acknowledged his creative debt to the multi-narrative films of Robert Altman and films such as *Happiness* (Todd Solondz) and *Magnolia* (Paul Thomas Anderson). Having expressed his dissatisfaction with 'narratives that [have] focused on the journey of a single protagonist', Bovell has instead sought to explore the way in which 'different points of view might glean quite different and sometimes contrary meaning from the same incident'. He comments:

I was interested in finding new narrative shapes...I wanted to work on a lateral plane rather than a linear one. I was interested in the random connections between people and how we make sense of our own lives through encountering the lives of others.<sup>4</sup>

Valerie's disappearance is the catalyst that drives the story-line. 'It is like a stone dropped into a still pond, the ripples circling out and affecting all that they touch.'<sup>5</sup> The text commences with reference to her death and then goes back to explore the sequence of events that led to the accident. This convention is typical of the detective or mystery genre, though in *Lantana's* case, as has been noted, we then detour into more emotional territory.

The plot is character-driven, with a number of interacting narrative threads:

- Sonja and Leon's marital dilemma
- Leon's relationship with Jane
- Jane's estrangement from Pete
- Eleanor's murder and its impact on her parents
- The police investigation into Valerie's disappearance

<sup>4</sup> Bovell, *Lantana* Screenplay, p.9.

<sup>5</sup> Bovell, *Lantana* Screenplay, p.10.

- Nik's complicity in the case and its effect on his relationship with Paula
- Claudia and her mystery man's blossoming rapport
- Patrick's affair with his married lover and the way this impacts on Valerie.

While these plot lines converge, there are few clichés and no resolute endings. The unpredictability and messiness of people's lives, accurately charted by the film, makes it impossible for things to be tied up too neatly.

## Style

Cinematically, *Lantana* is naturalistic in style. Lawrence has deliberately used a visual production style designed to complement the contemporary story being told. His stated agenda shuns an overtly contrived approach: 'The more things that you can get rid of, the simpler I can make it, the better. That's my theory, my process.'<sup>6</sup> For example, only natural light was used in the filming and the lack of artificial lighting, though difficult from a technical perspective, enhanced the actors' freedom to deliver realistic performances. Cinematographer Mandy Walker explains that Lawrence believes not so much in creating a mood, but 'in the mood already being there in the location, and so it was about capturing that'.<sup>7</sup> This strategy of utilising the inherent potential of a given location or set, as opposed to creating a simulated atmosphere, gives the film a particularly authentic texture.

## Reading Film as Text

*Lantana* is a non-print text and, as such, students must refer to film language and the particular qualities that characterise the genre. While there are elements common to all texts – characters, themes, and so forth – there are also features specific to cinema. How do the images on the screen create meaning? How do added components, such as the soundtrack, reinforce the underlying concerns of the text?

Students are expected to have an understanding of the different *camera shots* and *angles*, and ask themselves what choices have been made, and why. In the study of film the camera work is just as instrumental, in terms of informing the narrative, as character-driven action and dialogue. *Long shots*

<sup>6</sup> *Lantana* Press Kit, Beyond Films, Sydney, 2001, p.9.

<sup>7</sup> *Lantana* Press Kit, p.10.

traditionally establish location and set the context; for example, in *Lantana* they are used to differentiate between the different Sydney locales – inner suburban, coastal bushland – and provide visual clues about which subplot is taking centre stage. *Medium shots*, the most common, show aspects of a scene and *close-ups* are typically used for more intimate moments between characters. These are employed to great effect in *Lantana*. For example, Lawrence uses *extreme close-up shots* when Valerie and John are making love; the camera focuses directly on their faces and we are able to read the raw ambivalence and sense of personal isolation that each brings to the act. *Tracking* and *panning shots* direct the audience to follow a specific course, while a *zoom shot* isolates detail by ‘zeroing in’ from a wide angle, or long shot, to a close-up in one continuous movement.

Furthermore, the *placement of the camera* is a relevant consideration. Shooting a character from above or below can alter our perception of the situation they are in and may suggest either empowerment or the opposite. For example, the *overhead shot* of John’s car, parked in the laneway where his daughter’s body was found, emphasises his disempowerment and the fact that his life has been robbed of choice. Note also the *framing* (visual composition) within the scenes – the ways in which people or objects are arranged. In *Lantana*, Lawrence often positions his characters sitting opposite each other, or side by side in cars, as they attempt to interact with each other. Consider the effect of this positioning.

*Mise en scène* (a French term meaning ‘scene setting’) refers to the visual and design elements of a film. Literally everything we see on the screen – locations, sets, background details, costumes, even the use of colour and lighting – has been deliberately selected and is encoded with meaning. When Valerie leaves her messages on the fateful night of the accident, the two photographs on the phone table – one of her and Eleanor, and another of her and John smiling into the camera – are a poignant reminder of the way that grief has ripped this family apart. Another interesting example is the backdrop used in the scene where Jane manipulates a meeting with Leon. They stand in front of a large billboard featuring a child’s face; her eyes are positioned between their two figures, silently rebuking their clandestine flirtation.

It is worth noting the continual play of contrasts in the film. The colour and animation of the Salsa club is juxtaposed against the lonely, dark