

## **I WANT TO DANCE BETTER AT PARTIES – PRESS BOOK**

**Title:** I Want to Dance Better at Parties

**Tagline:** A hybrid documentary about love, loss and Latin dance

**Logline:**

In need of some form of human contact, a grieving man takes up dance classes with a young instructor.

**Synopsis:**

Recovering from the tragic death of his wife, Phillip Rose finds himself in middle age both a single parent and a single man. After a clumsy episode on a dance floor at a house warming party, he begins private dance classes with Melissa, a young instructor. Over a number of lessons their friendships evolves, and Phillip confronts his loneliness and isolation while learning a variety of Latin dances. Based on a true story this hybrid film fuses documentary, drama and dance to create a unique and moving portrait of a grieving man.

**Longer synopsis:**

Recovering from the tragic death of his wife, Phillip Rose finds himself in middle age both a single parent and a single man. After a clumsy episode on a dance floor at a house warming party, he begins private dance classes with Melissa, a young instructor. Over a number of lessons their friendships evolves, and Phillip confronts his loneliness and isolation while learning a variety of Latin dances.

Based on a true story, this hybrid film fuses documentary, drama and dance to tell the story of a man whose life is in stasis after the death of his wife. Conceived by documentary filmmaker Matthew Bate and choreographer Gideon Obarzanek the project began with extensive filmed interviews with Phillip Rose in 2011. From the interview transcripts, Gideon Obarzanek work-shopped scenes with actors, creating a critically acclaimed play for the Sydney Theatre Company. Matthew Bate then wrote the screenplay for the film fusing the play's dramatised dialogue with Phillip's original interview narration, as well as imagining new dramatised scenes.

I WANT TO DANCE BETTER AT PARTIES playfully interweaves the genres of documentary and drama. The real Phillip Rose watches and comments upon the recreations of his life being playing out before him by actors. The actors were also filmed in real world situations, competing in an actual dance competition and interacting with members of the public. Bate and Obarzanek have fused their own backgrounds in film and dance to create a unique and moving portrait of a man overcoming loneliness and grief through dance.

## **ABOUT I WANT TO DANCE BETTER AT PARTIES**

### ***Key Cast & Credits***

*Phillip:* Steven Rodgers

*Melissa:* Elizabeth Nabben

*Phillip Rose* as himself

*Directors:* Matthew Bate & Gideon Obarzanek

*Writers:* Matthew Bate & Gideon Obarzanek (based on the play *Dance Better At Parties* by Gideon Obarzanek)

*Producer:* Rebecca Summerton

*Editor:* Bryan Mason

*Cinematographer:* Bryan Mason

*Composer:* Benjamin Speed

*Production designer:* Obie O'Brien

*Sound:* Pete Best

### ***Technical specs***

*Runtime:* 28:30 mins

*Picture:* Colour

*Shooting format:* HDV

*Ratio:* 16:9 Anamorphic

*Original frame rate:* 25

*Sound:* Stereo & 5.1

*Exhibition:* ProRes & HD CAM

### ***Director's statement – Gideon Obarzanek***

Having been introduced to dance through traditional folk dancing at an early age, I have been regularly interested in where and how dance appears in people's lives. I first interviewed Phillip Rose back in 2004 when I was doing research for an intended documentary about various men's relationships with dance. The documentary never eventuated, so I created a performance instead. It was a little unusual producing a live dance/documentary on stage, but it turned out surprisingly successful. Looking back, that was really the beginning of a pattern that has generated much of my stage work. I think about the material normally required to make a film, and then make live performance instead. So finally almost ten years later, teaming up with filmmaker Mathew Bate, I made a film. Oh, and also a play... I couldn't help it.

Back in autumn 2004, I sat in a suburban dance studio watching a private dance lesson. The student was an unexceptional middle-aged man and his instructor, an elegant and graceful young woman. It was a weekday afternoon and they were the only people in the room. While the music played, she gave him gentle instructions and guided him around the dance floor. Aware of his own inadequacy, the man regularly looked up from his shuffling feet and offered apologetic jokes. The young teacher protested with convivial false compliments and he graciously accepted them as well-intended encouragement. Earlier on the phone, when I first arranged this meeting, this man told me he had begun dance lessons because he just wanted to dance better at parties. Now observing him in the empty studio holding on to this woman, I realised it was far more than that. He was lonely.

Making the play uniquely shaped the writing and making of the film. Matthew and I first re-interviewed Phillip Rose, as well as his dance teacher and then worked for weeks with actors in the studio. From the interviews, we knew so much about these two peoples' lives but very little of what actually happened in the dance studio. Combining interview transcripts with improvisations, the play, first commissioned by Sydney Theatre Company, became a work of fictional detail based on and underpinned by a documentary reality. Parts of this play were then incorporated into the screenplay making it both a documentary and a drama where the subject appears as himself observing his own character played by an actor... Sounds weird, but it works.

### ***Director's statement – Matthew Bate***

I always hated dance. For me it was embarrassing. Then I became involved in the genesis of the techno and house music scene and learned to move to a simple beat. It felt good.

When I first met Gideon in a workshop run by the ABC and Adelaide Film Festival called the HIVE we began to talk about how a documentary could exist as a live performance. Gideon had been doing this already in some form – in particular his work *I Want To Dance better at Parties*. He'd interviewed a number of men about their relationship with dance and created a work that fused dance and the documentary interviews on stage. One of these men was Phillip Rose and Gid had talked about wanting to turn his story into something bigger. This was the genesis of the project.

We began by re-interviewing Phillip Rose almost 7 years after Gideon had first filmed him. By the end of this process we had the transcripts of two long filmed interviews. We still didn't really know what we were going to do with the material other than we wanted to play with the genres of drama and documentary.

Months later Gideon revealed that he had been asked by Sydney Theatre Company to create a play and that he was going to use Phillip's story as a beginning. Thus began the making of 'Dance Better at Parties' the stage play. Gid work-shopped the play with his actors Elizabeth Nabben and Stevie Rogers using Phillip's story and his interview transcripts as raw material. I was also asked to attend some of the workshops and was able to feed into the process. The idea was that Stevie and Elizabeth would also star in the film.

When the stage play was close to completion I began to write the screenplay. I had the luxury of having Gideon's play dialogue and the structure of the dance lessons that I had seen the actors perform, as well as being able to draw upon Phillip's verbatim interview. Writing the screenplay was a matter then of organising this material into a narrative, imagining how to dramatise events outside of the dance studio (the play was set entirely within the one room) and most importantly how drama and documentary could exist together.

To have a documentary interview work-shopped into a play with actors, and then to use that play and those same actors to create a hybrid docu-drama from the same material, has been an amazing way to make a new work. Working with Gideon has been a fantastic experience and I've learned a lot from him. Our different skills and backgrounds have also added a lot to the hybrid nature of the project, and we were able to work collaboratively in every aspect in the genesis of this project. This working method would be something I would be very keen to apply to longer-form work.

### ***Production notes (by Matthew Bate)***

Gideon and I first met in the HIVE workshops in 2011. Our initial conversation began with me wondering if a documentary could take place live on stage and what that might look like. This conversation led to Gideon telling me about his work *WANT TO DANCE BETTER AT PARTIES*, which involved documentary interviews with ordinary men talking about how dance was important in their lives, being played during a live dance performance. He mentioned that one of these interviews was with a man called Phillip Rose whose story Gideon was interested in turning into a longer work.

After we secured funding to make the short film based on Phillip's story Gideon and I did a master interview with him. This was an entire day where we sat him in front of a camera and had him tell us the story of how he became accidentally embroiled in the world of Latin dance. We imagined that from these interview transcripts we would then write the dramatized version of the story.

Not long after this Gideon was asked by Andrew Upton and Cate Blanchett at Sydney Theatre Company to devise a play. Gideon decided that 'Parties' might make a great two hander. So suddenly this project, which had begun as a dance piece, had become a film and now a theatre show at one of Australia's premiere companies. We decided that the play and the film could work off each other in that we could use the same actors from the play in the film, and that some of the dialogue and staging devised by Gideon and his actors could feed into the film. I became involved in the play rehearsals with the play being based on verbatim dialogue from the Phillip Rose interview we had conducted earlier that year. Gideon and the actors were also devising dialogue as they worked.

Elizabeth Nabben (Melissa) began the workshops with David Wenham playing Phillip. I remember one of the most memorable moments of these early rehearsals was David improvising a Paso Doble bullfight dance (which was taking place in Phillip's imagination). Wenham's performance was hilariously inspired as he danced and fought this imaginary bull eventually killing it, raising it above his head and casting it into the crowd. Unfortunately David had commitments to another project and the schedules clashed. The equally brilliant Stevie Rogers replaced him.

I saw the premiere of the sold out theatre season, which was fantastic. The play was an intimate two hander that charted the relationship of these two characters and their changing needs and desires. I took Gideon's script and began the process of creating a screenplay, using the play as a kind of narrative spine (the idea of the ten dance lessons leading to a competition). We knew the film was going to be very different from the play in that it needed to be Phillip's story alone, but I was able to use dialogue, some staging ideas and so on as a basis for the script. The most crucial difference was how the film would fuse reality and drama. How could we take Phillip's story, dramatise it but also add documentary reality?

One of the initial ideas was to have the actor and the subject in the same scenes and interacting in some way. I felt it was important to be completely upfront about exposing this actor/subject artifice and so the opening scene features the real Phillip Rose narrating his past experiences with panic attacks while our actor Stevie Rogers plays out the scene. With this out of the way early in the film we felt free to explore and push the way the real Phillip and 'actor Phillip' could interact. It was however important that the audience relate and empathize with Stevie as Phillip, so after this initial interaction the real Phillip isn't seen for some time. Later on it was a matter of working out elegant ways in which the actor and real subject could interweave so the film has a sense of being a drama that seamlessly becomes 'documentary'.

I was very keen on placing our actors in real world environments and to film this in a kind of hidden camera way. I felt this would again add to the sense of reality. We photographed a lot of the film on a very long lens so that our actors could walk on real streets among real people. The nicest example of this is the dance competition at the end of the film. We managed to convince the organizers of a local Latin Ballroom competition to let us become a part of the event. Our actors were then allowed to become competitors in the actual competition and blend seamlessly among the crowd.

Two days before the dance competition shoot I told the actors they would have to perform their final dance medley at the real event (the organizers let us take over the competition dance floor for 25 minutes) and I think the nerves of performing in front of these semi-professional dancers and judges really added to the sense that this were really happening. We managed to shoot the dance routine four or five times in that very hectic 25-minute window and this really captured the reality of two people dancing nervously in front of a live audience.

The process of involving the real Phillip Rose in the making of the film was a delicate but rewarding experience. Obviously the subject matter is very raw and we were asking a lot to interview him and then make works from these personal experiences. But Phillip was very open to each process. From the film point of view I was up front with him that this would be my interpretation of his interview recollections, and that scenes would play out as I imagined them. I wasn't so much interested in replicating exact events, rather to filter these through my lens and focus on an emotional journey that felt authentic.

If I look back on my films I think this one is the 'nicest'. Gideon and I both joke about this as we've both been known for creating dark works – mine exploring the forgotten corners of pop culture and Gideon utilizing cutting edge video mapping technology and so on. And here we were making this unrequited love story about an ordinary bloke who falls for his dance teacher while learning ballroom. I must say it was one of the best filmmaking experiences I've had and the chance to make a film with Gideon in this unusual way is a process we are hoping to repeat in 2015.

### ***A few interesting story angles***

- \* The film is the result of a creative partnership between a choreographer (Gideon) and documentary filmmaker (Matthew Bate)
- \* Interesting genesis for a documentary: the director's began by interviewing the real Phillip Rose, from these transcripts a play was written by Gideon for Sydney Theatre Company, and it enjoyed a sell out season. From the play dialogue Matthew Bate then wrote the documentary screenplay.
- \* Unique hybrid film fusing documentary and drama, where the film's subject appears in scenes with the actor playing him.
- \* This was one of two Closer Productions film premiering at the AFF 2013 and comes after the company premiered 2 features and a short film at the 2011 Festival.

## **MAIN CAST BIOS**

### **STEVEN RODGERS – “PHILLIP”**

Steve has ‘made a living’ in theatre, film and television in both acting and writing for over twenty years. Despite having played Psycho-killers, Shakespearian drunks, grieving parents, Alan Bond, swingers, corrupt politicians and a goat; he never imagined himself dancing. Since completing “Dance Better At Parties” Steve feels his wife Jo looks at him with a tad more sparkle in her eyes.

### **ELIZABETH NABBEN – “MELISSA”**

Since graduating the VCA in 2010, Elizabeth has performed in “The Crucible” at Melbourne Theatre Company, “Dance Better at Parties” at Sydney Theatre Company, and “Tis Pity She’s a Whore” at Malthouse Theatre. Her screen work includes “Neighbours”, “Winners and Losers”, and the video work “How to Feel” for ACCA/AGNSW. Elizabeth is currently performing as Julia in the national tour of Agatha Christie’s “A Murder is Announced”.

## **KEY CREW BIOS**

### **MATTHEW BATE – WRITER/ DIRECTOR**

Matthew Bate creates documentaries dealing with obsessive people, pop-culture and outsider artists. Matt’s films are marked by unique storytelling devices and a bold visual style. His first feature-length documentary, *Shut Up Little Man! An Audio Misadventure*, premiered in competition at Sundance 2011 and was nominated for 4 ACCTA awards.

### **GIDEON OBARZANEK – WRITER/ DIRECTOR**

Gideon Obarzanek founded the dance company, Chunky Move in 1995 and was its Artistic Director until 2011. His works have been diverse in form and content including stage productions, installations and site-specific works. *I Want to Dance Better at Parties* was simultaneously developed as a film with Matthew Bate and Closer Productions as well as a commissioned play by Sydney Theatre Company.

### **REBECCA SUMMERTON – PRODUCER**

Rebecca is an experienced producer with many years experience in television and film. In 2011 she joined Closer Productions as a company director and to develop and produce their slate. Prior to this she worked at the South Australian Film Corporation where she was instrumental in establishing their innovative low budget feature program FilmLab. Rebecca’s current projects include feature documentary *Sam Klemke’s Time Machine* (in production, dir Matthew Bate), the low budget science-fiction *Archive* (in development, dir Ashlee Page), and the 3-part ABC Arts series *Hannah Gadsby’s Oz (post production)*. Rebecca is also one of four producers on the soon to be released unique feature film, *52 Tuesdays* (dir Sophie Hyde).



## *GLOSSARY OF DANCE*

(source:

[http://dance.about.com/od/partnerdancestyles/tp/Ballroom\\_Dances.htm](http://dance.about.com/od/partnerdancestyles/tp/Ballroom_Dances.htm))

### **Cha Cha**

The Cha Cha is a lively, flirtatious ballroom dance full of passion and energy. The classic "Cuban motion" gives the Cha Cha its unique style. Partners work together to synchronize each movement in perfect alignment.

### **Rumba**

The Rumba is considered by many to be the most romantic and sensual of all Latin ballroom dances. It is often referred to as the "Grandfather of the Latin dances".

### **Tango**

The Tango is one of the most fascinating of all ballroom dances. This sensual ballroom dance originated in South America in the early twentieth century.

### **Waltz**

The Waltz is one of the smoothest ballroom dances. It is a progressive dance marked by long, flowing movements, continuous turns, and "rise and fall." The dance is so graceful and elegant, Waltz dancers appear to glide around the floor with almost no effort.

### ***Contact details***

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