



Laura Brent (Mia) kisses Xavier Samuel (David), watched on by best men Kris Marshall (Tom) and Kevin Bishop (Graham).



# The best things in life

*A Few Best Men* marks Stephan Elliott's return to Australia. Rachael Gavin visited the set of the wedding comedy and found the director in good form.

**S**TEPHAN ELLIOTT IS a changed man. No longer is he the stressed out filmmaker who can't sleep at night for fear rain may ruin the next day's shoot. The director of one of Australia's most successful films of all time, *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, Elliott has adopted a more relaxed, carefree attitude to work and life.

After 17 years in the UK he's also moved back home – and not just to make *A Few Best Men* – but to stay for good.

He's bursting with enthusiasm for his latest project, a comedy about a destination wedding gone wrong from the writer and producers of *Death at a Funeral*, and it's rubbed off on the rest of the cast and crew.

On set at Sydney's Fox Studios Australia in February 2011, the cast and crew are buzzing as the infectious beats of the Village People's *YMCA* blasts from a wedding marquee.

Elliott sits in front of a monitor stomping his foot, yelling the lyrics as his actors and extras bust out the famous dance moves. He yells cut and the cast, including legendary entertainer Olivia Newton-John, spill out of the white tent giggling.

The project couldn't have come at a better time for Elliott whose decision to return to Australia was sparked by a global event which had a very personal impact. The financial crisis struck the night his last film, *Easy Virtue*, opened at the 2008 Toronto International Film Festival. It was the same night as the press launch for the stage version of *Priscilla*. Elliott decided to attend the movie premiere rather than "tired old *Priscilla*". Hopes were high for the flick. Important sales were lined up and it was supposed to be the hit of the festival.

"We premiered that night and at eight o'clock the stock market went and the world fell apart," he recalls as



(Left to right) Laura Brent (Mia), Rebel Wilson (Daphne), Olivia Newton-John (Barbara) and Jonathan Biggins (Jim).

cast and crew break for lunch. "*Priscilla* suffered, everybody suffered... and I watched in a short time – literally in weeks – London died. It died.

Absolutely totally and utterly collapsed in front of my eyes and I just had this terrible feeling.

"Then the let down of *Easy Virtue*: we had sales lined up that were so important and the next day all the sales dried up."

But it wasn't until he heard a warning bell coming home from London one night that he decided to leave. Police tape was strung up in the main street. There'd been a murder. Elliott knew instantly it was time to go and, with the house packed in four days, he left. He tried the US but realised he "wasn't in that league – no one's going give me a \$250 million movie". So he came home where the dollar is strong and the future seems brighter.

It wasn't long before the script for *A Few Best Men* was in his hands, although it took some convincing, given the filmmaker's famous vow to only do projects he develops himself. Arclight Films founder, and one of

the movie's four producers, Gary Hamilton, managed to persuade Elliott to read the script and after a few good laughs he signed on.

"So it was against my better judgment. I said 'We'll see how we go when I'm attached and if it struggles'. Next thing you know the train had left the station," he says.

But the relaxed director, who rides through the sound stage on a bike as cast and crew prepare for their next scene, reveals he is a different person these days. He has a fresh perspective on his craft and a new attitude to life which helped him cope when the bank pulled out on the first day of pre-production and *A Few Best Men* was in danger of collapsing.

"We were supposed to be in the can by now and on the first day of pre-production the bank walked and I said 'That's it, it's over. I've seen the way the rest of the world's gone.'

been underwater in Queensland, so everything happens for a reason."

The realisation has been a long time coming for Elliott who says he used to stay awake all night checking weather reports for rain. Now he's "rolling with the punches" and was even carefree enough to dare the heavens to open up while they were shooting outdoor wedding scenes.

"I sleep too, which I never do. I'm going to bed at night and I actually sleep. It's also zero expectations now. We all do, we all get it. The actors were talking about it the other day – you know you've got something really good and then people don't go or the timing isn't to be or whatever."

"I'm sort of going back to where I was with *Priscilla* saying 'I don't give a shit what happens to this film'. If it goes straight-to-DVD, it goes straight-to-DVD and so what? We all had a good

Producers Share Stallings and Laurence Malkin were attached to Dean Craig's script several years ago – around the same time as *Death at a Funeral* – but felt it needed more work. Adding Australia to the mix brought it into focus.

"That's when I think the script really snapped into place," US-born Stallings explains. "He'd gone away and fallen in love with an Australian and it added so much depth to it as opposed to 'we're having a wedding somewhere else and it goes to heck'."

But you can't make a wedding movie without the perfect setting and a beautiful dress and *A Few Best Men* has both and then some. The set is impressive.

Production designer George Liddle built a round marquee to use on set when they couldn't find one to hire. The 360-degree structure was built with a wooden frame covered by mate-

layer-upon-layer of luscious material. The result is spectacular. Though she admits the experience did turn her into a Bridezilla.

"I've never done a wedding before, which is hilarious. And when I first started getting into it I was horrified because I was really cynical about it and people spend so much money on weddings... before you knew it I had actually become the terrible bride, you know, screaming about flowers and stamping my feet and wanting things to be perfect."

Adding the extra pizzazz to the film is seasoned performer Olivia Newton-John. An old friend of Elliott's, it was his idea to cast her as the mother of the bride in the film. Watching her on set as a tipsy mum on the dance floor, it's clear Elliott was right on the money.

"One day at a party she had the dirtiest laugh," he recalls.

"She just never lets that laugh out. I said to her many years ago 'we've gotta find something – I gotta see that person' and I don't think she ever lets that person out. She's at a point in her life where she doesn't really care. She's evolved to a point where she's saying 'you know what? I'm gonna let my hair down' and that's just gold. Olivia gold. Because she's ready to move on a bit I think."

"I've watched her on *Oprah*, you know she got the *Grease* pants out and whatever and there was a part of her you could see her just going 'oh'. No different to me with *Priscilla* – it's a hundred years ago, you know. It's time to move on, she's ready to move on."

Expectations for the film's success both in Australia and internationally are high. It's already attracted a solid number of pre-sales thanks to Elliott's success with *Priscilla*.

And it's clear he plans to continue embracing his new relaxed attitude and let destiny take its course.

"I'm home – I don't know where the world's going but it's a good place to be..."

"The passion's died a bit, can't you tell? Which I think is quite healthy. We're lucky to be doing this: we do dress ups for a living, we get to blow things up and whatever. That realisation; that this is a fun job, it's not rocket science, we're keeping people entertained – as long as we're keeping each other entertained then that's a job well done." 

*A Few Best Men* is released in cinemas on January 26 by Icon. Check out the IF website's Video Content section for the trailer.



Screen Australia and Screen NSW just kicked into gear. They actually knew we couldn't afford to have another go after *Mad Max* went down. And they just said 'no, we gotta get to screen.' They loaned us the money to get it over."

The delay meant a different location (NSW's Blue Mountains instead of Queensland, which was soon hit by floods) and a different cast. Elliott believes it was fortuitous.

"I've got close to a dream cast," Elliott says of his actors which include British comedic actor Kris Marshall, *Twilight* star Xavier Samuel, cabaret performer Tim Draxl and old friend Olivia Newton-John.

"I think it's one of the best casts I've ever worked with and we would've

time. I'm taking the same attitude. If people don't go, people don't go. And fuck we're having fun by the way."

The project has also meant a reunion for Elliott with colleagues from his early days in the business including Oscar-winning costume designer and long-time friend Lizzy Gardiner, hair and make up stylist Cassie Hanlon and co-producer Antonia Barnard. Combined with the writer and producers of *Death at a Funeral*, it seems *A Few Best Men* is being made by close to a cinematic dream team.

The comedy about an Englishman who marries an Australian girl, only to have his big day disrupted by his rowdy larrikin best men, is more than six years in the making.

rial attached with Velcro so the crew could film from any angle with the flick of a wrist.

To complete the look, the tent was adorned with flower displays, gold chairs and a chandelier. And as if by magic, petals (lovingly dropped by a crew member on a cherry picker) fell from the ceiling during the bridal waltz.

Making the dress posed some challenges for costume designer Gardiner who's perhaps best known for the infamous American Express Card dress she wore to collect her Academy Award in 1995 for *Priscilla*.

The digital ARRI ALEXA camera used for the shoot made the wedding dress look flat, so Gardiner added