Somehow I failed to see Gus Van Sant’s _Elephant_ (2003) to which virtually every reviewer of 2:37 has drawn attention, almost as if it constituted some sort of hypotext from which Murali K. Thalluri’s compelling feature has sprung.

As an _Elephant_ virgin, then, at least as far as seeing the actual celluloid is concerned, what I will have to say here will inevitably be the result of a different intertextuality.
Blood seeps under a locked toilet door at a large, bright and airy-looking high school. This is not blackboard-jungle territory, but it has all the marks of an everyday, middle-class suburban seat of learning and concealing. In dreamy, non-realist images, kids are waiting in slow motion round the corridors and lawns. Then a girl bangs on the toilet door; a teacher (Gary Sweet) tells onlookers to ‘piss off’ and worse later on (do teachers really say things like this to students these days? I’d have been sacked for doing so when I was last a schoolteacher). The janitor opens the door; the girl covers her mouth at what she sees – and we don’t see at this point – and the film renews to EARLIER THAT DAY, as a title announces.

Who the suicide victim is will not be revealed until the film has come full circle and brings us back to the time at which it happened, at 2:37pm. But it will not be a simple linear narrative journey in a major firm, with a six-figure salary’ but Melody, his sister whom he drives to school in an L-plated Mercedes, recalls a different Dad, and she would like to be a primary school teacher, but the implication is that this wouldn’t be seen as sufficiently ambitious. Good-looking sports jock Luke ‘fucking hates school’, as the camera moves from his matutinal jerking off to his statement of ambition of being a top-class athlete. Sean confesses to the camera ‘I love cock’, and bitterly reflects that he is just a ‘perverted little outcast’. Sarah only wants marriage, which doesn’t ‘mean you have to let yourself go’, and worries about how her father ‘hates me being good at things’. And finally, Steven, listening with longing to the soccer, talks of his medical problems, of having one leg longer than the other and of having two urethras, which means he is always wetting his pants. All this intimate information is planted, without hurry and without over-empha-
sis, in the prologue, before the title is announced. The build-up for each of these kids is done with enough perception and sympathy to whet the viewer’s appetite: is one of these the 2:37 suicide? If not, how are they connected to the body in the toilet? Or are they connected at all? The scene shifts to the school, where Sean and Steven are both seen as being solitary, as they walk through the other kids who aren’t to be the film’s special concern, many of them in couples engaged in snogging habits that may, for all I know, be common, if not indeed de rigueur in today’s high schools. But they aren’t being singled out for the poignancy of their separateness; instead, the film inclines to Melody’s plaintive view: ‘You think you have friends but, when serious stuff happens, you’re alone. Some stuff you can’t share, so what do you do then?’ The film is too intelligent merely to tease us with this idea; it’s not concerned with whipping up suspense about who might turn out to be the body in the toilet; it’s not, in my view, the ‘full-on melodrama’ that one reviewer called it, and, unlike melodrama, it doesn’t let us off any hooks. We’re focused on these six students, but the implication is that any of the others might be facing problems and conflicts of like significance.

Equally, though parents may have plenty to answer for, Thalluri isn’t simplistic enough to turn it into a latter-day Rebel Without a Cause (Nicholas Ray, 1955). (The conventional blaming of parents would in any case be to some extent balanced by Steven’s praise for his family’s ‘amazing support’, even though, in another subtly painful twist, this means he can’t complain to them about his treatment at school). A society that endorses Marcus’s father’s values or that still tolerates homophobic taunts or that encourages girls to spend useful time in the toilet mirrors preparing to look like TV weather girls has to bear some responsibility for cluttering up lives at such a vulnerable age. But it needs to be stressed that 2:37 isn’t a tract, any more than it is a melodrama. It is a compassionate exploration of some of the hideous pains of being young and, essentially, alone. The film doesn’t even suggest that all young people are necessarily negotiating such life-damaging dramas, nor, as I’ve said, that the six selected for closer scrutiny are necessarily exceptional. What these six have in common is a yawning gap between the faces they present to the outside world and what’s going on inside: that serious stuff you can’t share.

There have been plenty of Australian films about the difficulties of growing up. Even this year, there was The Caterpillar Wish (Sandra Sciberras, 2006) in which secrets and lies complicated the process. In 2:37 we are a long way from those coming-of-age movies that were so much a feature of the Australian revival of the 1970s and 1980s: they tended to lead us towards a more comforting sense of how qualities of character would emerge to guide their youthful protagonists.
these are issues that are going to change lives in ways that can’t at this stage be conceived of. What, for instance, is the future of the girl who, after a pregnancy test conducted in the school loo, finds she is having a child by the brother who’s ‘been touching me since I was thirteen’? What about the sporting jock who warns Sean not to touch him and punches him – after frantically returning his kisses?

The film ends on the suicide. That’s not the kind of closure one expects from a teen movie, and that anodyne generic label could hardly seem less appropriate here. We’re light years from the sort of world in which nothing matters more than whether Molly Ringwald settles in the end for gawky Jon Cryer or sleek Andrew McCarthy in Pretty in Pink (Howard Deutch, 1986), or similar conflicts in similar enjoyably flossy entertainments. 2:37 is for real: it is not exploitative; it doesn’t just offer a parade of incest, homophobia, bulimia and gender stereotypes in action for us to feed on greedily. Without being at all preachy it is socially responsible. The 21-year-old director is on record as calling it ‘the film that saved my life’ and ‘my ultimate hope is that it may save many others’. That doesn’t mean that the film will work to this end, only that that is what he had in mind – and, more importantly, that he was not setting out to tell a reassuring story about the laughter and tears of growing up, but a story that shocks with its feel of authentic rawness.

In a perceptive review of the film, Philippa Hawker wrote that the suicide scene with which the film opens was ‘an early example of Thalluri’s narrative approach, carefully structured to half-reveal, half-conceal’. I’ve referred above to how the film broaches the tragedy that books its narrative, but Hawker is right about how the rest of 2:37 proceeds in this elusive way. For instance, on a simple level, when Marcus calls to his sister Mel that he’s leaving for school, and she emerges in tears, we know neither why she is crying nor whether these two are alone in the house. Only much later does a phone conversation between Mel and her mother make clear that the parents are divorced. Mother is on holidays somewhere and with a mindless ‘Oh sweetie, gotta run, love you’, hangs up and leaves Mel, who’s in real trouble of a kind we don’t learn about until later. Almost everything we come to know about these young people seems to be in a constant state of being undermined or reversed by the next thing revealed.

And the film’s visual style colludes with this narrative approach as the camera drifts about the school’s corridors, picking up a conversation here, then letting us hear it again from another point of view that doesn’t so much confirm the earlier impression as make us wonder about gaps in perception. There are other kinds of ‘gaps’ too: between the graceful arcs the camera describes as it lifts up above the school’s arena of conflict and doubt and to the serenely swaying treetops whose clarities contrast with the often blurred realities below; and between the use of classical music on the soundtrack (e.g. Vivaldi’s ‘The Four Seasons’), rather than the youthful score one might have anticipated reinforces the visual contrast. These stylistic decisions point to a director, young as he is, who is both ambitious and willing to upset conventional expectations. His daring in matters of form and style are not, however, at the service of mere iconoclasm: there is a quiet assurance in the telling that rivets one and ensures that the tragedy around which the film is built is as shocking as it is meant to be.

‘Shocking’ may seem an odd word to use when I’ve claimed that the film is not in the least exploitative, but the things that shock do so more potently for their being neither flinched at nor wallowed in. The casual, brutal profanity, especially in the jocks’ taunts to gay Sean, or the cruelty of their treatment of the disabled Steven, is shocking precisely because of the unthinking heartlessness it betrays. The scene of incestuous coupling is no mean feat. Thalluri has taken a risk in using an almost entirely unknown cast (it’s almost another shock to find veteran Gary Sweet in there), but it has largely paid off. The boys are perhaps better served by the screenplay, in terms of differentiation, whereas the girls are at times easier to confuse. Even so, Teresa Palmer’s Melody is outstanding with moments that register as wracking a sense of withheld anguish as I’ve seen in some time. There are a few moments when character effects seem overstated in the performances but overall the young cast, mostly first-timers, is remarkable, none more so than Charles Baird as Steven, learning without bitterness to live with deformity and derision.

If Australian cinema can continue to throw up such venturesome filmmaking, it may be said to be enjoying rude health. Who knows what Thalluri might achieve by the time he is, oh, twenty-five?

Brian McFarlane is preparing the fully revised 3rd edition of his Encyclopaedia of British Film (due out this year) and co-authoring a book on Michael Winterbottom. •

Endnotes

1 ‘Assured but in his shadow’, The Sunday Age, 20 August 2006.
2 ‘Director’s Statement’, Production Notes, 2.37, p.12.

It is becoming almost a cliché to say what a good year last year was for Australian films, but it is also true, and true in ways that are particularly heartening. By that I mean that there is a resurgence not so much of originality as of ambition. Ambition in choice of subject – for instance, a film version of Macbeth, another entirely in Aboriginal languages, and now this audacious young man who, without the usual financial support, has made a film that lingers powerfully in the mind. It lingers there because of the clarity of its vision and because of its highly individual, inventive way of articulating that vision. It takes on a lot: to keep the relationships and dreads and subterfuges of its six young people clearly before us in their complexity is no mean feat. Thalluri has taken a risk in learning without bitterness to live with deformity and derision.