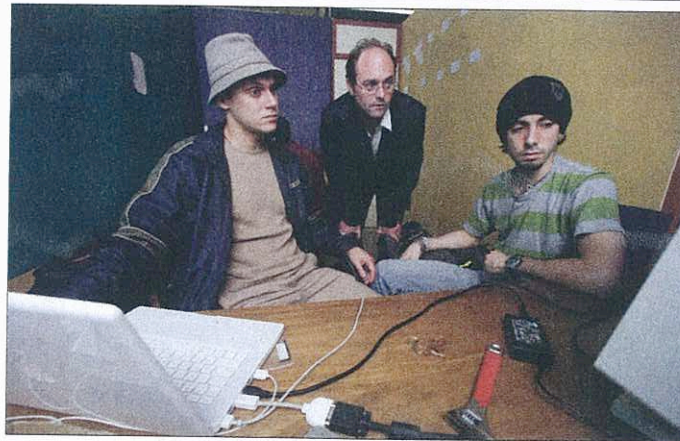


Ben Ferris

Being a film director is tough – but is it as hard as directing film students? As someone who does both, Ben Ferris, **director of Sydney Film School**, zooms in for a close-up on the industry and argues why cars should be banned and swing dancing should be compulsory

Where do you go in Sydney to get inspired? I'm a junkie for the foreign film festivals we have – Italian, French, Russian... I can watch six movies in a row without blinking. The inspiration for me lies in the ability to transport to other cultures, and to investigate the human condition in all its forms. I will never tire of the human potential: it's an endless source of inspiration. A quieter source of inspiration is a walk down to Rushcutters Park to sit on a bench in the sun and read a good book. When it's raining, I like sitting in Berkelouw's Books café above Oxford St where I can observe all the people on the street below, huddling under umbrellas. I've always found something deeply comforting about being surrounded by books – all these thoughts from across the ages...



Ferris reel Students edit their Sydney Underground Film Festival entry

“I watched *Elephant Man* after I had my wisdom teeth pulled out. I identified with him”

What was the film that changed your life and why? It was Tarkovsky's *Nostalghia*. The second time I watched it – at the Chauvel cinema – after it finished and the lights came up, my friend told me I had tears in my eyes and I hadn't even realised! It was an epiphany. It was the start of a new journey for me, another way of seeing films: a poetic style – films that open our minds to contemplation – a dialogue with the filmmaker, and are not merely a one-way retelling of a story. I say the second time, because the first time I saw it I fell asleep several times!

What film is your guilty pleasure?

I watched David Lynch's *Elephant Man* after I had my wisdom teeth pulled out, and I deeply identified with him! It was better than the Panadeine Forte.

What's the first line from a film that comes into your head? Where's it from?

“I am not an animal” from Lynch's *Elephant Man* springs to mind as I talk about it. This is what I kept repeating to myself as I looked in the mirror after my wisdom teeth were removed. It's also a deeply poignant line in the film, as he is trying to find acceptance within society but remains an outcast; something I also relate to.

If you were Mayor of Sydney, what three things would you do? Well, let's run wild: I would replace mainstream cinemas with art-house cinemas all over the place, at every corner, like 7/11s, screening enriching films as regular as Slurpees. We can learn a lot from this kind of cinema, like how to become more compassionate, tolerant and humane beings. Secondly, I would close all streets to car access,

Life & times

1975 Born 25 August, Sydney

1999 Graduates with First Class Honours in Ancient Greek, Sydney University

2004 Establishes Sydney Film School, at 29

2004 Wins Grand Prix for short film *Ascension* at One Take Film Festival, Croatia

2005 Wins Grand Prix for short film *The Kitchen* at Kurosawa Film Fest, Tokyo

2008 Directs first Australian-Croatian feature film *Penelope*

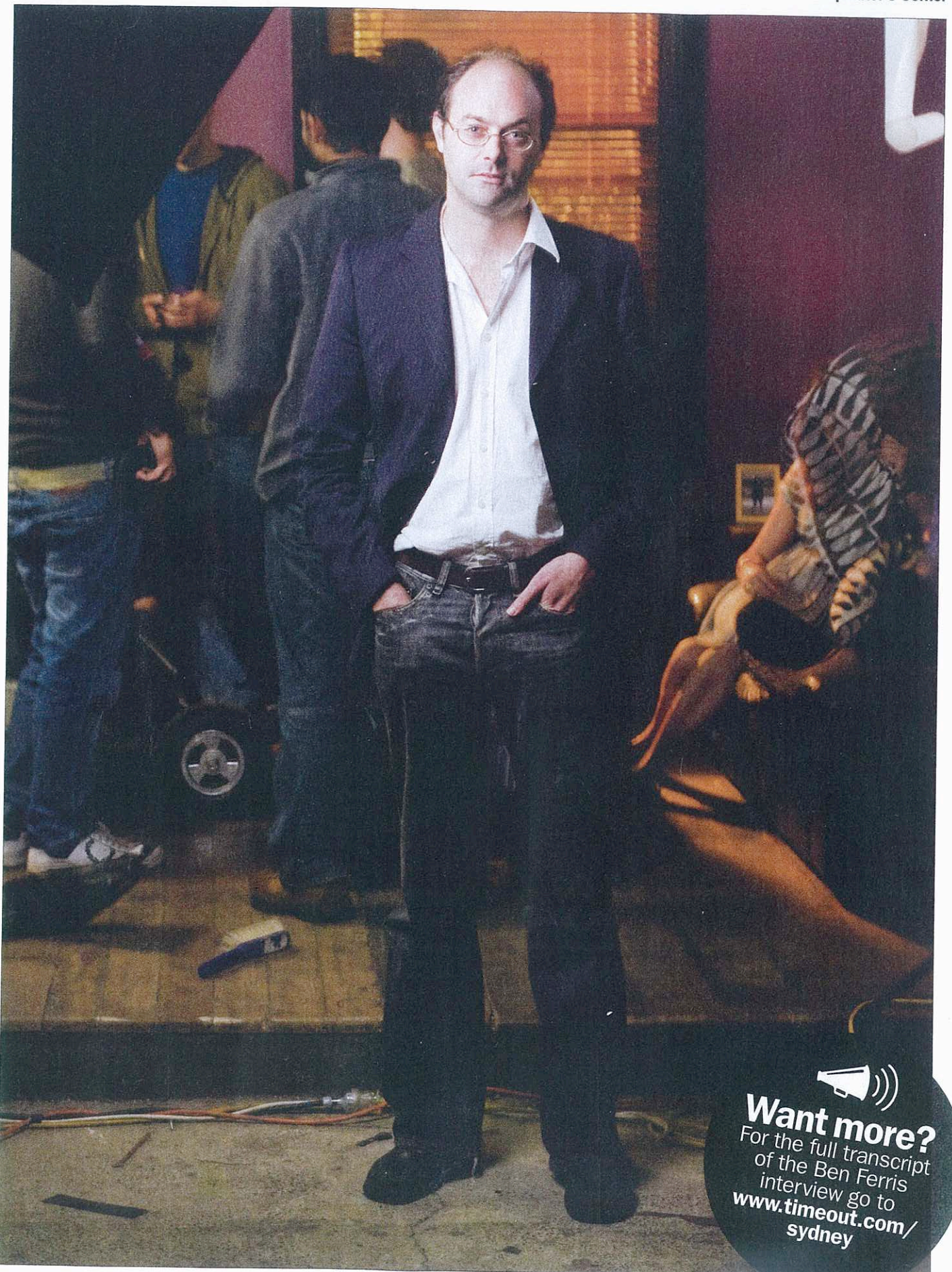
so that the city is alive with bicycles and pedestrians. And finally, and most importantly, I would make it compulsory to attend swing dancing lessons in the centre of the city on a newly created piazza.

The Sydney Film Industry. You have 60 seconds. Go. A lot of focus on stars, the beautiful and the glamorous...a focus on American cinema...on short film festivals that promise instant fame...red carpet...Tarantino with Aussie slang...BEWARE! For me, the most exciting developments are happening within indigenous cinema: filmmakers who have a soul with stories to tell and take risks in the telling. This is key to developing a healthy film culture; one where our filmmakers are encouraged to take risks in telling meaningful stories, to push the medium as far as it can go, to not merely retell stories in a conservative sense. This is what I'm trying to do at the Sydney Film

School: to build a community of filmmakers that are prepared to take risks, and to support each other in the process. We need to build creative teams prepared to take risks in order to support the future of this industry.

What do you want to do before you die?

I would like to inspire people to watch and make enlightening films; to become better people; to communicate with each other across the globe. In short: world peace. The nice thing about the Sydney Film School is the strong sense of community, where people come simply to have a coffee, watch a film, or swap stories and reflections about the world. Anyone who has ever been an undergraduate before knows this is where the magic happens, this is where the real seeds of change are planted: in the minds of tomorrow. *DR Several of Ben Ferris's Sydney Film School students have films in the Sydney Underground Film Festival, dedicated to supporting independent and experimental filmmaking, running from 11–14 Sep at the Factory Theatre in Marrickville (www.sydneypenelope.com). For more on this festival, go to Special Screenings p52 ●*



Want more?
For the full transcript of the Ben Ferris interview go to www.timeout.com/sydney