

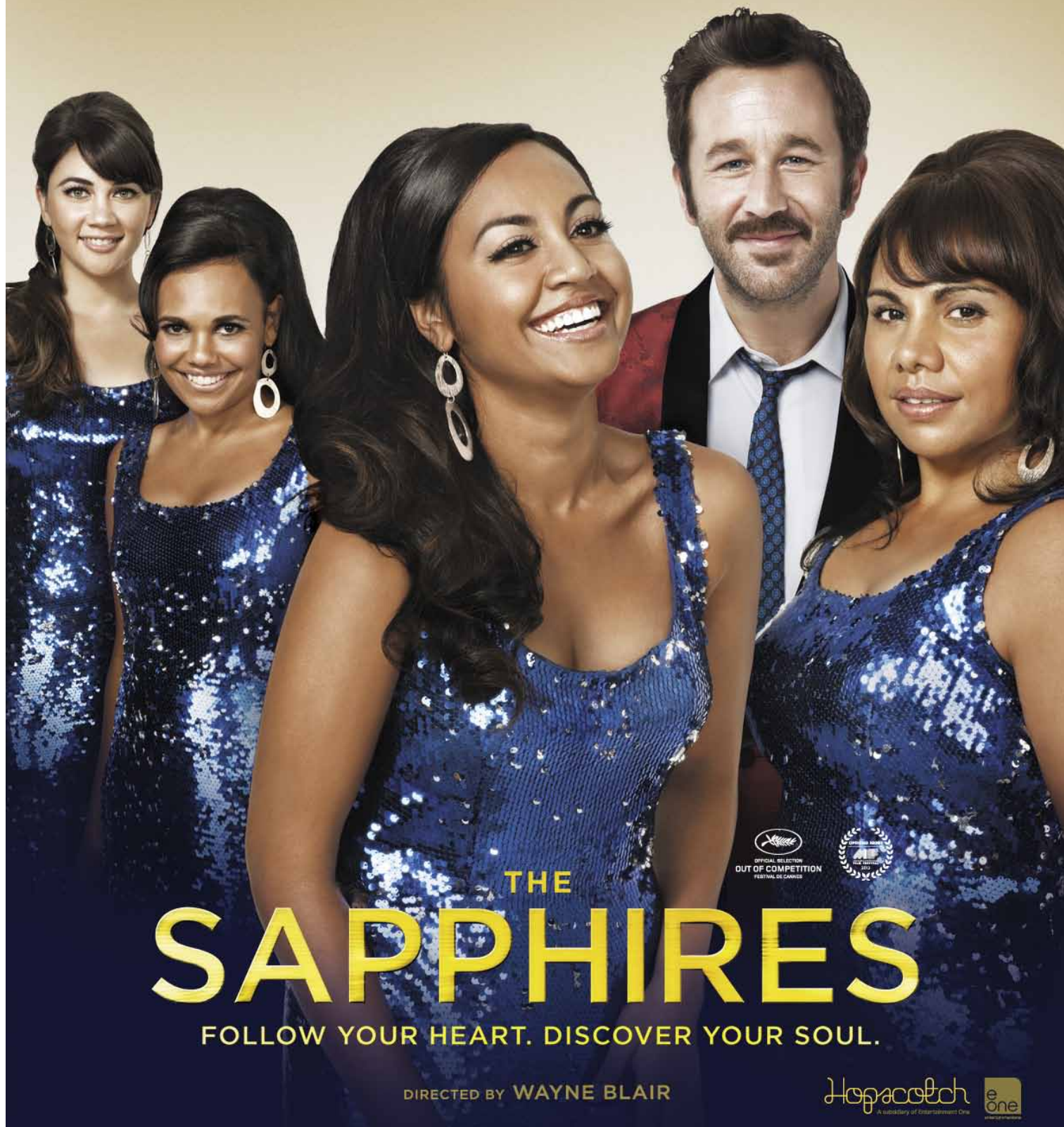
CHRIS  
O'DOWD

DEBORAH  
MAILMAN

JESSICA  
MAUBOY

SHARI  
SEBBENS

MIRANDA  
TAPSELL



THE  
**SAPPHIRES**

FOLLOW YOUR HEART. DISCOVER YOUR SOUL.

DIRECTED BY WAYNE BLAIR

Hopscotch  
A subsidiary of Entertainment One  
e one

© ATOM 2012

A **STUDY GUIDE** BY WARREN PRIOR & SUZANNE MELLOR



AUSTRALIAN TEACHERS OF MEDIA

<http://www.metromagazine.com.au>

ISBN: 978-1-74295-220-8

<http://www.theeducationshop.com.au>



## Background to the real Sapphires

The film was inspired by a true story about four indigenous women: sisters Laurel Robinson and Lois Peeler and their cousins Beverley Briggs and Naomi Mayers. These four Yorta Yorta women, born along the Murray River, were part of an extended family who regularly sang together in their community during the 1960s and 1970s. They toured Vietnam in the late 1960s, singing to American troops during the prolonged Vietnam War. All four women still live in Australia, working tirelessly for indigenous peoples' rights.

## Synopsis of the film

The film is initially set on a remote mission in outback Australia, where three sisters who have sung together since they were very young enter a talent quest in a pub in a nearby country town. Even though they are overwhelmingly the best act, they don't win, as Aboriginals are not welcome in the town. The girls are 'spotted' by a down-on-his-luck Irish musician, Dave Lovelace, who is the pub pianist. As he dares to publicly voice his support for the sisters' undoubted talent he is promptly sacked by the pub owner. One of the sisters hears about American marines in Vietnam needing acts to perform and they convince Dave to get them an audition. As they say, the rest is history, with the three sisters – Gail, Julie and Cynthia now joined by their 'lost sister', Kay – wow the US army recruiting officers and get to Vietnam. Over there they have a professionally successful tour and many personally challenging experiences, with the war happening all around them.



## Curriculum links

*The Sapphires* is a PG-rated film, so it is suitable for a wide range of year levels, as are the issues it raises about indigenous Australians. Because of some swearing and non-explicit sex scenes, the film is mainly suited to middle to upper secondary school levels.

The curriculum areas that the film could be related to include:

- SOSE/HSIE
- English
- Media Studies
- Civics
- Politics
- Indigenous Studies
- Music Studies

## Australian National Curriculum

*The Australian National Curriculum – History* makes specific reference to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Primary Years 4–6 and Secondary Years 9–10. In Years 11–12, many state curriculum frameworks refer to Indigenous studies.

In the proposed *Australian National Curriculum – Civics and Citizenship* the cross curriculum priorities are:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures
- Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia
- Sustainability

The first of these proposed priorities, 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures', recognises the importance of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures for their capacity to develop more informed citizens and contribute to social cohesion and inclusion. The subject will acknowledge the contribution to Australian society and civic life of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and recognise them as having the longest continuous histories and cultures in the world.

The Civics and Citizenship curriculum will encourage students to learn about Indigenous social and political processes and laws. It will also provide opportunities for students to enhance their understanding of contemporary Indigenous experiences of Australia's legal system and citizenship.

## Production of the film

Goalpost Pictures Australia and Screen Australia in association with Screen NSW, 2012.

## Starring

Chris O'Dowd, Deborah Mailman, Jessica Mauboy, Shari Sebbens, Miranda Tapsell





## Context of the Film

Before viewing the film it is worthwhile doing some research to place the issues raised in the film into some form of historical context. A good starting point is going back to the above background information section on the real Sapphires.

### ◆ Activity 1 – Yorta Yorta peoples

- Investigate the origins and location of the Yorta Yorta peoples. If you begin at the Wikipedia site, you can use the map to get a broader picture of the different indigenous language groups.
- What is a 'mission'? Investigate the role missions played 'educating' young Aboriginal children? Why did they exist? What were the values underpinning the missions? How effective were the missions in the assisting young Aboriginal children?
- Underpinning the many Indigenous issues in the film is the complex history of race relations in Australia. Research the meanings and relationship to the film of the following milestones in indigenous history in Australia: 'Terra Nullius', Native Title, and the 'Stolen Generation'. This will provide students with a richer, empathetic understanding of the racial background to the film.

### ◆ Activity 2 – The 1960s

- Ask students to conduct a survey about life in Australia in the 1960–70s. They may ask some senior teachers or their grandparents who were born in the 1940–50s about what was it like living in the 1960s. Topics might include music, gender, food, housing, attitudes to governments, wars, relationships, family relationships,

personal and national identity, drugs, etc.

- Construct a table of significant events in the 1960s and early 1970s
  - Cultural example – the visit of 'The Beatles' to Australia
  - Political example – Australia at War
  - Indigenous affairs example – the 1967 referendum
  - Social unrest example – student activism
  - Global example – the extent of Australia's interaction with the world, especially the USA.

### ◆ Activity 3 – The Vietnam War (1962-1972)

- Locate Vietnam on a world map.
- Conduct a web search about the causes and outcomes of the war and Australia's involvement.

## Issues Raised

This film raises a large number of issues that are relevant to all of us today, nearly fifty years after its setting in the late 1960s. Below are some of the issues or concepts that the film touches. It might be useful for teaching purposes to consider the concepts in terms of a spectrum or as opposites.

In one sense this film is an amusing and triumphant celebration of self-discovery, family and music. It might also be considered, at its core, a story about the 'great divide' in Australia: that of belonging vs not belonging.

Below can be seen other divides which are subsets of this key idea:

**1:** The Sapphires perform; from left: Gail (Deborah Mailman), Cynthia (Miranda Tapsell), Julie (Jessica Mauboy) and Kay (Shari Sebbens) **2:** Gail **3:** Kay, Julie, Gail and Cynthia have fun with the US troops **4:** Gail in front, with Julie, Cynthia and Kay



- Racism vs tolerance
- Individual identity vs nationhood
- Innocence vs experience
- Relationships vs isolation
- Family vs the individual
- Laws vs tradition
- The 1960s vs the 2010s

A number of other concepts are important in analysing the film.

- Multiple causation
- Motivation
- Evidence
- Empathy

#### ◆ Activity 4 – Teaching and learning about concepts

Perhaps before starting with specific concepts, it might be a good idea to look at a couple of strategies about how to teach concepts.

Concepts are invaluable in teaching because they enable students to transport an idea to a range of contexts saving you from having to explain it again in every context. Existing concepts can be used as a basis for acquiring new concepts. For example, a student who knows what a horse is can relate the new concept of unicorn to horse in order to understand the new concept. Here are two ideas about teaching and learning concepts.

**1. Word webs** should be learned in context. The contextual setting gives students clues to word meanings. The teacher should provide examples in which the new word is used correctly and students should have opportunities to apply the word's meaning to different contexts. So in the example

**1: The Sapphires perform in Vietnam 2: Sebbens, Mauboy, Tapsell and Mailman**

of belonging, you might begin by using the word in a number of contexts, for example, the school community.

**2. Concept Maps** are a technique for representing knowledge in a visual form; they are networks of concepts. You may like to try developing a concept on the blackboard instead of, or as well as, the above strategy, for several reasons, e.g. a visual approach may be beneficial for some learners and a connective rationale may suit others.

The teaching strategies are similar, in the sense that they draw on student ideas. The benefit of a concept map, however, is that it places the concept in the middle and ideas are built around it, showing connections. In the film there are ongoing references to and examples of the same concept.

Many of the above concepts are interrelated and could be discussed together. You might also identify other concepts in the film. Let take just one concept – belonging – and look at how it is explored in *The Sapphires*.

#### ◆ Activity 5 – Belonging vs not belonging

The film explores, on numerous occasions, the issue of belonging, as opposed to not belonging or being different.

- What does it mean to belong?
- Do we all need to belong?
- Is it possible to belong to a number of groups at the same time?
- How do you know when you belong (or don't belong)?
- What might you do to increase your chances of belonging (or not belonging)?
- What factors might work against you belonging (or not belonging)?
- What are the feelings and values of belonging (or not belonging)?





2

*The Sapphires* also explores the push and pull of not belonging, on a personal level. Irishman Dave is at the crossroads of belonging and not belonging, for he wants both.

- What groups does he appear to belong to early in the film?
- How does he demonstrate his not belonging with *The Sapphires*?
- To what extent does the push-pull effect of belonging and not belonging play out in his relationship with Gail?
- Why does Dave, by the end of the film, so want to join *The Sapphires*' family?

Explore some examples from the film where *The Sapphires*, at the same time, both belong and don't belong. As a start, how important is family to *The Sapphires*? Contrast this with the scene in which the taxi refuses to pick up the two sisters.

Having discussed some of the issues raised in the above questions, now look at broader examples of belonging or not belonging in the film. You might wish to explore how belonging is played out in:

- Family
- Country
- Race/ethnicity
- Love
- Gender

How does the sense of belonging and/or not belonging contribute to the discussion about racism?

### ◆ Activity 6 – Racism vs tolerance

*The Sapphires* has the issue of racism at its centre, but it takes a number of subtle forms, including



1

reverse racism. The film is not didactic or heavy-handed in its message and the overall feeling is one of triumph and celebration.

- How was this balance between a triumphant story and an examination of a serious issue achieved in the film?

Consider the early flashback scene, set in the late 1950s in Australia, of Aboriginal children being taken away from their parents.

- How did the whole Aboriginal community react to the arrival of white people intent on removing children from their families?
- In the film, which sister was removed from her family?
- What was Gail's role with her younger sisters and how did this role affect her relationship with them in the group?
- Which groups of people were taking Aboriginal children?
- Where were they taking them?
- Why were they being taken?
- What arguments were used to justify the removal of Aboriginal children from their families?
- The taking of children has often been referred to as creating the 'Stolen Generation'. What does this mean?
- Up until when was this practice continued in Australia?
- What is your view of the practice of taking Aboriginal children from their parents?

A more subtle form of racism in the film occurs throughout *The Sapphires* tour of Vietnam during the war in the early 1960s.

- Look at the many war scenes in the film, and especially the audience cohort at *The Sapphires*' concerts. What racial group predominates? Why is this the case?
- Over 7000 Australian soldiers fought with American soldiers in the Vietnam War throughout the 1960s. Is it odd that there were no Australian soldiers in the film?

1: Gail visits Dave (Chris O'Dowd) in hospital in Saigon  
2: Dave and Gail in front, with Kay, Cynthia and Julie behind



- Is it odd that so little space is given to Vietnamese people in the film given the fact that the war took place in their country?
- Compare the introductions of The Sapphires given to their soldier audiences at the beginning and later during their tour.
- What explanation do you have for the changes?
- Why were the Sapphires so readily accepted by the soldier audiences in the war zone of Vietnam?
- What do you think the US soldiers in Vietnam knew about Aboriginal Australians?
- Construct an advertising poster for The Sapphires on tour in Vietnam.

An even more subtle form of racism occurs when Dave accuses Gail of being racist. Find this scene. With most of the film concerning issues about racism by white people towards black people, this is a case of reverse racism.

- What does 'reverse racism' mean?
- Note the conversation in which Dave calls Gail racist. What was his supporting argument for this accusation?
- How does Gail react at the beginning and then at the end of the conversation?

Consider also the role of Kay, a cousin of the three sisters, who used to live on the mission but who has lived most of her early life with a white family in the city. She has fairer skin and has attended secondary school.

- Why is Kay living in the city away from her extended family?

1: The Sapphires 2: Gail 3: Kay, Julie and Cynthia



- What evidence is there that she appears to have abandoned her Aboriginal heritage?
- When she returns to her Aboriginal family home for her mother's funeral, what is her attitude to her cousins?
- What defence does Kay later give for her attitudes?
- Why is Gail so antagonistic towards Kay for much of the film?
- What reasons did Kay have for joining The Sapphires?
- What reasons did the sisters have for letting her join the group?

There are so many blatant racist scenes in *The Sapphires*, from the scene of opening small town talent quest, to the wounded American soldier's reaction to Robby in the helicopter.

- What are the intellectual and emotional arguments promoting racist attitudes?
- What causes the characters in the film to have racist views?
- Are there any characters in the film who do not have racist views?
- In 2008 the then Prime Minister of Australia, Kevin Rudd, made a national apology to Indigenous Australians – the 'Sorry' speech to the Stolen Generation. Find the speech on the internet, read it and discuss why he felt it appropriate to make the apology. How important has this speech been in eliminating racist attitudes to Indigenous peoples?

## Music

Music is a huge part of the film and includes some of the period's greatest hits. It's a big ask, but you could try to list the songs that are Australian and those that are from USA. Music can be representative of the culture of a society. The film uses music as a context of the 1960s as well as a vehicle to display the amazing talent of The Sapphires. You may be surprised to know that there are twenty-six songs in the film.





### ◆ Activity 7 – Music

- What is country and western music?
- What is soul music?
- In the film how does Dave define both forms of music? Research the origins of soul music and consider who the listening audience was for soul music.
- Dave is convinced that soul music is the only form of music that is both valuable and appropriate for The Sapphires to sing in Vietnam. Why does he think this?
- Discuss the rapid progress of The Sapphires through their gigs in Vietnam. What is different about their music from the beginning of the tour to that at the end of the tour?
- What did Dave mean by telling The Sapphires to ‘make it sound blacker’?
- How did they do it?
- Why did The Sapphires not sing in their Indigenous language? (Compare this to Gurrumul Yunupingu)
- Speculate about why The Sapphires did not continue in the music scene after coming home from the Vietnam War.
- As a follow-up activity look at another ATOM Study Guide, *murundak – Songs of Freedom*, written by Roger Stitson.

## Humour

The film is triumphant celebration of four young and talented singers. Its predominant tone is one of lighthearted humour, yet the central issues raised by the film are very serious and personally challenging to our beliefs and values today. The film is

deliberately provocative.

### ◆ Activity 8 – Humour

- What techniques did the filmmaker use to be provocative?
- What type of humour is it?
- Who had the humorous lines?
- Do you think the film got the balance right between humour and challenging ideas?

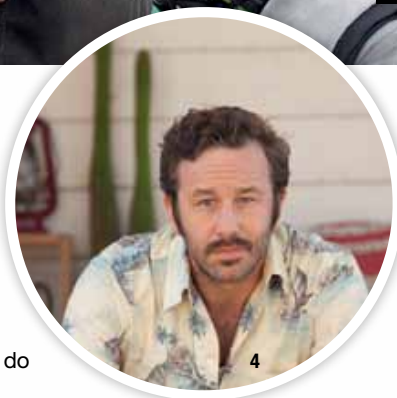
## Some Notes on the Cinematic Style/ Characteristics of the Film

The following three activities need not be left to last! They can be interwoven with many of the other earlier activities as illustrations of the cinematic style of the film.

### ◆ Activity 9a – Newsreels

At key moments the film adopts a style where images from newsreels are quickly run together, with the soundtrack being present but hard to follow. It

1: Dave 2: Cynthia with Hendo (Eka Darville) 3: Julie performs 4: The Sapphires in Vietnam



is chiefly a visual style rather than a dialogue style.

At the beginning of the film there are a number of clips of international events and Australian lives, crushed together.

- At first viewing, what kind of world do these images depict?
- What about the director's purpose do they convey to the viewer?
- Mid-film there is a group of film images of Indigenous Australian protest events. What is the visual and narrative context of these images and what effect do they have on the viewer?
- Several times there are instances of newsreel images being overlaid with images of The Sapphires being transported around Vietnam. How effective are these in creating 'mood'?

Near the end of the film, a set of images illustrate a key dramatic event in the US. But this time the importance of the images is directly referenced in the characters' actions and dialogue in the film (both in Vietnam and on the mission).

- What is the reaction of the film's different groups to this event?
- What links their reactions?
- How powerful is this cinematic device of

1: Director Wayne Blair in Vietnam 2: Tapsell and Sebbens backstage in Vietnam 3: Dave 4: O'Dowd

bringing together the 'real', outside world and the film's storyline in focusing on some of the film's key issues?

### ◆ Activity 9b – Flashbacks

Another cinematic device used in the film is the flashback. The most obvious examples are associated with the pivotal event of the taking of the children. The flashback images are widely separated in the film.

- What effect do the flashbacks and their separation from one another have on the viewer?

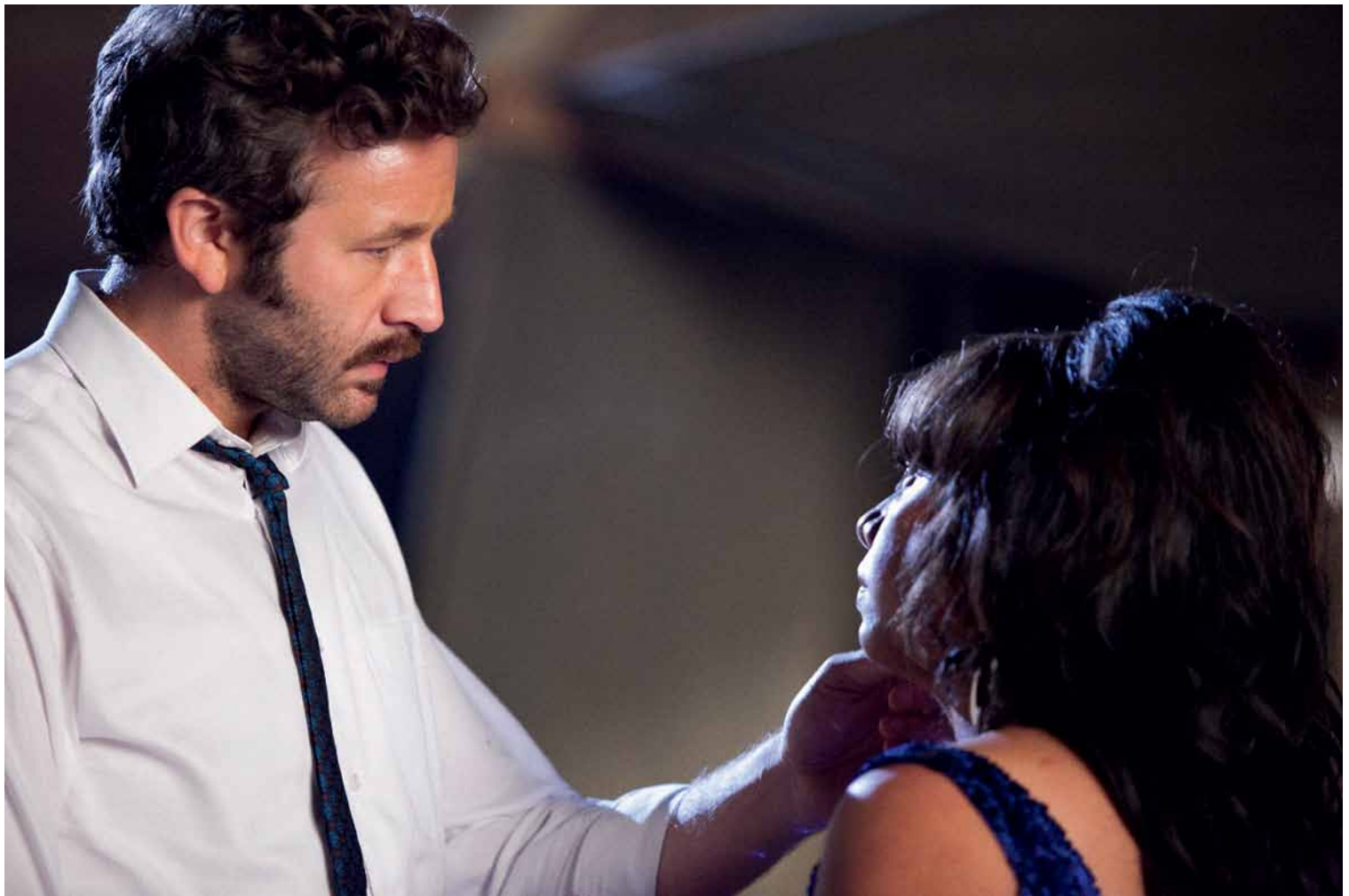
### ◆ Activity 9c – Cutting

Thirdly, the film adopts a general style of cutting from a point in the narrative where a decision will or needs to follow, to a new scene where the outcome of the decision is revealed. This device enables the film firstly to keep moving very quickly, secondly to convey precise information about the characters, and thirdly to support the film's humour, which is so important to the way the film connects with its audience.

- Find instances from your viewing which support these three propositions.

<http://www.itunes.com.au/thesapphires>  
<http://www.thesapphiresmovie.com>





This study guide was produced by **ATOM**. (© ATOM 2012)  
ISBN: 978-1-74295-220-8 [editor@atom.org.au](mailto:editor@atom.org.au)

For information on **SCREEN EDUCATION** magazine,  
or to download other study guides for assessment,  
visit <<http://www.metromagazine.com.au>>.

Join ATOM's email broadcast list for invitations to  
free screenings, conferences, seminars, etc.  
Sign up now at <<http://www.atom.asn.au/lists/>>.

For hundreds of articles on Film as Text,  
Screen Literacy, Multiliteracy and Media Studies,  
visit <<http://www.theeducationshop.com.au>>.