

# also opening

## Men's Group (MA15+)

★★★★☆

Director: **Michael Joy**

Starring: **Grant Dodwell, Paul Gleeson, Steve Rodgers, Paul Tassone**

Screening: **Chauvel Paddington**

DON'T be put off by the new-age associations of the title. This little Aussie sleeper is as rich as a chippie's armpit in the middle of February.

While the film's miniscule budget and limited release pattern might initially suggest a niche, tree-hugging inner-city market, *Men's Group* turns out to be as accessible as a Bunnings catalogue. And it might similarly encourage a bit of DIY handywork – in this case on personal improvement rather than home improvement. Even the raw, improvisational nature of the filmmaking serves the story well.

Directed by Michael Joy, *Men's Group* is a naturalistic drama, shot almost like a documentary. It tells the story of a diverse bunch of troubled blokes who come together at the house of a facilitator (Paul Gleeson) each week, primarily because they don't know what else to do. And they know they need to do something.

Freddy (Steve Rodgers), the father of a five-year-old daughter, has separated from his wife. His body-image problems are exacerbated by his spouse's parting revelation that she finds him repulsive. Pathologically cheerful, he tries to laugh off conflict. The further he sinks into despair, the rawer his jokes get.

Alex (Grant Dodwell) has about as much self-awareness as the axolotl he bought for his son. Unable to connect with his family, he gets pickled each night to anaesthetise his pain.

Cecil (Don Reid), an upright elderly gentleman, feels so alone he sleeps with a stone in the double bed to replicate the weight of his late wife. But compared to the dangerously wounded Moses (Paul Tassone) and Lucas (Steve Le Marquand), these men come across as emotionally well-balanced.

In *Men's Group*, Joy strikes just the right balance of toughness and tenderness in venturing into the relatively unexplored area of male intimacy. The result is a gripping ensemble piece, driven by uniformly strong performances from a talented bunch of actors, that manages to get underneath the character's emotional callouses without being glib or mawkish.

A genuine surprise.

**Vicky Roach**



True blue blokes: Steve Rodgers and Paul Tassone star in the drama *Men's Group*