

## Director's notes on the making of "Billal"

I became interested in the Lebanese community partly because of my friendship with a colleague Stan Correy, who was himself third generation Lebanese Australian. We developed an idea for a documentary about his family **Postcards from Beirut**. That film remained an unfinished script, but I became very interested in a story Stan did for the ABC which explored the isolation experienced by Lebanese families that had settled in suburbs on the Sydney's edge.

My original intention was to focus on a group of teenagers who were about to leave high school. I planned to follow their lives over the ensuing 12 months. This was the film I was originally researching. It turned into something quite different. Just after the Easter weekend (1994) I received a call from one of the kids who told me that a young teenager had been run-down while crossing the road outside his home. I'd already met Billal during the course of my research and I'd also met his mother. Suddenly this 16 year-old was lying in a hospital bed in a coma fighting for his life. He had serious brain damage.

I soon realised, however, that the drama around the bedside was one thing. Quite another was the trauma the family itself was going through. There were five other children in the house including two of Billal's brothers who were contemplating vengeance on the driver of the car Linc Beswick.

The family needed us as much as we needed them. They felt isolated. They felt they couldn't trust anyone - even social workers from their own community. We were the closest at hand. Our roles as filmmakers quickly became complicated as we became their counsellors and advocates. Our interpreter Alissar ended-up as an intermediary between the family and the bureaucratic outside world, and as the film progressed, she herself became an important on-screen character.

**Billal** turned out to be a waiting game. My original plan was to film key scenes that marked various stages of the boy's recovery. This was to be the film's main narrative line. Simultaneously I concentrated on fleshing-out the other characters - especially the two brothers. However, unexpected events were to intervene. The family's aborted attempts at finding a new house suddenly created a separate dramatic line. The film then became not one story but several stories knitted together. To make sense of this complex structure I started the editing process early. Rather than waiting 15 months we began the edit just after the first scenes had been shot.

The art of making a film like **Billal** is to predict exactly just how things will turnout, and therefore just how long the shooting is going to take. The idea is not to be too intrusive, but also not to miss any vital moments. All we had going for us was the opinion of a few specialists who warned us of various

stages of emotional and psychological adjustments Billal's parents were expected to go through. As the months went by, we were told, they would eventually become reconciled to their son's disabilities. Up to a point this happened but nothing prepared us for the shock when Billal's behaviour started to radically deteriorate after an operation, which was supposed to actually make him better! It came as a stark surprise, not only to us, but to the family as well.

It was a further surprise that the family still harboured hopes that their son would make a 100% recovery. The fact that our interpreter Alissar had to tell them the real truth highlighted a major communication failure on the part of the hospital reflecting a larger cultural gulf than we had ever imagined.

The stylistic approach I chose in **Billal** was similar to **Homelands** (1993), where I began to move right away from a classic 'fly-on-the-wall' approach evident in works like **Friends & Enemies** (1985) to a looser more hybrid style of 'verite'. I've decided that it's useless pretending to be invisible and hiding behind the camera. It makes a lot more sense, when it's appropriate, to include oneself in the visual frame or in the soundtrack of the film. These moments are important to remind the audience that they are watching a documentary where the filmmaker is making some impact on the story, and not a seamless piece of fiction.

It's also my belief that far too often ethical considerations take second place in the media and often get sidelined even in documentary practise. In a film such as **Billal** there are many months of filming, and people forget you're there. You often end up capturing moments of great intimacy, so you have an automatic obligation to treat the footage with maximum sensitivity.

Alissar and I discussed the film with the family after they saw it at fine-cut stage and they approved it with minor changes. In the final run, the Eters decided the film would help to restore their dignity after the gross violation they had suffered and the trauma they were still going through as a family.

**Tom Zubrycki, July 1996**

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