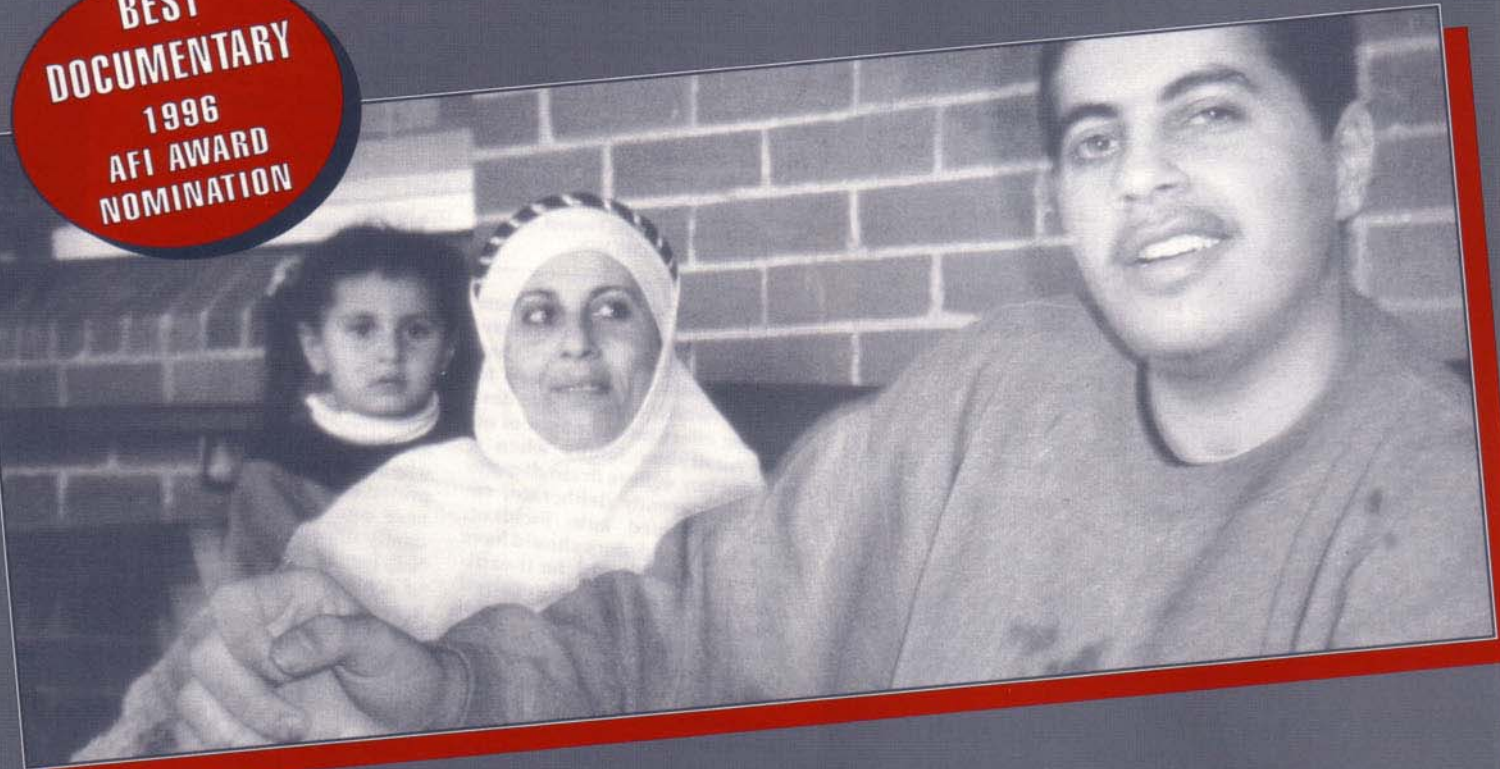


A TEENAGER IS RUN-DOWN

**HIS YOUNG LIFE APPEARS SMASHED WHILE
PARENTS STRUGGLE TO COMPREHEND**

HIS TRAUMATIC RECOVERY BEGINS ...

**BEST
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Billal

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a film by Tom Zubrycki

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**"'BILLAL' IS A FILM FROM THE SHARP END OF THE MULTICULTURAL DEBATE
- and Zubrycki misses none of its complexity ...
SYMPATHETIC, POLITICAL AND ABOVE ALL HUMANE, THIS IS ONE OF HIS BEST FILMS."**

- PAUL BYRNES, SYDNEY FILM FESTIVAL PROGRAMME

"... I started out making one film, but changed tack to make another - completely different. An extraordinary real-life drama was unfolding before my eyes ... For me documentary has to be absolutely compelling and that involves taking major risks."

-TOM ZUBRYCKI, DIRECTOR BILLAL

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86 MINUTES

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VARIETY

BILLAL
(AUSTRALIAN — DOCU)

JULY 1-14 1996

A Jotz production, in association with the Australian Film Finance Corp. and the Australian Broadcasting Corp. Produced by Tom Zubrycki. Executive producer (ABC), Dasha Ross.

Directed by Tom Zubrycki. Camera (Movielab color), Joel Peterson; editor, Ray Thomas; music, Jan Preston; sound, Robert Sullivan, Gary O'Grady; associate producers, Ray Thomas, Alissar Gazal. Reviewed at Sydney Film Festival, June 8, 1996. Running time: 86 MIN.

Tom Zubrycki, who has been chronicling Australia's disenfranchised for 15 years, has come up with a potent docu in "Billal," which explores the devastating effect on members of an Arab-Australian family when a teenage boy suffers brain damage in an apparently deliberate, racially motivated auto incident. This deeply sad story should have no trouble finding niche theatrical exposure after a well-received launch at the Sydney fest. Internationally, both docu fests and quality TV nets will want this one.

Zubrycki was originally working on another project — about disaffected teenagers in the southwestern suburbs of Sydney — when he came across the Etter family, which moved to Australia from Lebanon a few years ago. Abdul, the husband, has been out of work since the ransacking of his uninsured business, and Amal, his formidable wife, runs the family home, with three lively teen sons and a younger daughter. All their lives are shattered during an Easter weekend after a racial argument with Anglo-Australian neighbors, which leads to stone throwing and a visit from the police. Next morning, 16-year-old Billal, the couple's second son, is hit by a fast-moving car driven by an Anglo youth while he's walking on the normally quiet street outside his house.

At first, it seems as though Zubrycki will focus on the volatile racism inevitably present in suburbs like this throughout the Western world. But the filmmaker, who picks up the Etters' story soon after Billal has been taken to hospital in a coma, is more interested in depicting the tragic effects of this brutal, senseless incident on Billal and the members of his family.

A series of brain operations (some shown in confronting detail) leave Billal severely affected. His personality undergoes startling changes; he becomes sexually aggressive, at times violent; he puts on an enormous amount of weight; he is unable to care for himself. After months of surgery and therapy, he comes home, pitifully transformed. Meanwhile, his father quietly opts out of his troubles, listlessly letting his dynamo of a wife battle on the family's behalf and deal with the kindly but overworked hospital staff. Amal emerges from the tragedy as a kind of Ma Joad matriarch.

In this she's helped by "Billal" associate producer Alissar Gazal, who started out as Zubrycki's interpreter and liaison with the Lebanese community, but who is evidently drawn to Amal and tries to help her. It's a fascinating example of a member of a docu film crew crossing the line to become part of the drama being filmed. Contrast is drawn between the sophisticated, Westernized Gazal and her far more traditional friend; the women are about the same age, but in every other way are worlds apart.

Zubrycki includes two interviews with the driver who caused Billal's transformation; the youth avers he was stoned at the time and expresses regret. A court sentences him to a very light prison term for culpable driving.

The filmmakers manage to turn this "small" tragedy into a profoundly moving exploration of a family's struggle to survive. Home videos taken of Billal before the accident are movingly contrasted with the unhappy aftermath.

Technical credits are polished given the "on the run" style of filmmaking, though there are indications that the Etters are, at times, acting for the camera, as when Amal modifies something she'd said previously "because they're filming now." In this respect, Zubrycki's point is also to question the very validity of this type of documaking. In all, "Billal" is a thought-provoking, and all too brief, document of considerable impact.

—David Stratton

Director/Producer TOM ZUBRYCKI • Camera JOEL PETERSON • Editor RAY THOMAS
Associate Producers ALISSAR GAZAL, RAY THOMAS • Composer JAN PRESTON • Mixer ROBERT SULLIVAN