

## **Framing the Political Through the Personal: A Chat with Tom Zubrycki**

Since his earliest days in Sydney's community video movement, veteran documentary maker Tom Zubrycki has been framing the political through the personal, with his intimate portraits of individuals caught up in the winds of conflict and change. His latest film delves into the divided discourse around global warming, through the struggles of Sydney-based activist Maria Tiimon and the plight of her low-lying Pacific island nation of Kiribati, which is already succumbing to rising sea levels.

On the eve of *The Hungry Tide*'s theatrical release, Dan Edwards spoke to Zubrycki about his fifteenth film, his 70s roots and the state of play in Australia's documentary realm.

### **Were you aware of the plight of Kiribati before you met Maria Tiimon and started making *The Hungry Tide*?**

I'd been following the climate debate for a number of years, and became very interested in the countries on the front line. Kiribati [pronounced *Kirri-i-bas*] seems at the very edge of the earth for most Australians, yet it is only just east of Bougainville. The average height above sea-level of its 33 atolls is only two metres, making them very vulnerable to sea level rise. In 2007 the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change predicted that global sea-level rise would be as much as 0.8 metres by the end of this century. Subsequent scientific studies have the rise as much as 1.9 metres. Even a one-metre rise would make Kiribati virtually unliveable.

### **Has the Australian government given any indication that it would be willing to take Kiribati refugees if the nation is completely submerged?**

It's too early to say. Kiribati is not even on the radar for most Australians. Kiribati's Pacific neighbours – Tuvalu, Samoa and Tonga – have an arrangement with New Zealand that they can move there. But that choice is not available to the Kiribati people. The label "Climate Change Refugee" does not officially exist in international law, and in Kiribati I found a wholesale rejection of the "refugee" label, at both the political and community levels. For the people of this small Pacific nation, the term refugee evokes a sense of helplessness and a lack of dignity that contradicts their very strong sense of pride.

### ***The Hungry Tide* is an interesting echo of *The Diplomat* [Zubrycki's 2000 film about East Timorese leader Ramos Horta] in its focus on an individual foisted into a political role outside their country's borders, and the personal pressures they face playing this role. What initially attracted you to Maria's story?**

In *The Hungry Tide* I started with the issue – climate change – but I soon narrowed it down to the Pacific. It struck me as a great irony that Kiribati has contributed least to global carbon emissions, but has the most to lose in terms of its vulnerability to climate change. The next step was to personalise the issue and find potential story-lines that could form the documentary's narrative spine. For me, an idea has to lead to character and story for the film to work.

It didn't take me long to track down Maria. I first met her at a day-long seminar organised by the organisation she worked for – the Pacific Calling Partnership, an NGO based at the Edmund Rice Centre in Sydney. I was attracted to Maria because she was a little bit shy – the total opposite to Ramos Horta, who was driven by ego and the unshakeable belief that history was on his side. For Maria, being an advocate for her country was something that was thrust on her. She was a little reluctant at first, even though she believed passionately in the cause. There were challenges up ahead – especially the Copenhagen Climate Conference – and I wanted to see how she would manage the pressure. What I didn't then realise was that there were other challenges that were more subtle and complex – like her needy family back on the islands.

### **One of the hallmarks of your style is the extraordinary level of trust and intimacy you build with your subjects. Do you spend a lot of time with them before you start filming?**

In my experience it's important to have the camera running early to get people used to the process. Trust and intimacy develop as the filming progresses, and the first few weeks can be quite a bumpy ride. In *The Hungry Tide*, the first major block of filming was set for October 2009, when Maria was due to go back to Kiribati to do some work in preparation for the upcoming Copenhagen Conference. Days before leaving news came through that her mother had died. The situation became quite emotionally charged and I had to proceed very carefully. I think trust was built because we kept filming down to a bare minimum on that trip.

Another thing that really helped establish trust was having Nicola Daley as DoP. It turned out Nicola and Maria were virtually the same age, and there was immediate rapport and empathy between them. This became enormously important as filming continued.

Maria, by the way, expected the filming to end after the Copenhagen Conference. I had to gently tell her that I still needed to be around. It was stressful for her being on camera, but she got used to me and our relationship went to a much deeper level. As far as she was concerned I was now part of her family. This of course entailed a range of obligations on my part. Every time I left for Kiribati on my own there were things I was asked to take for her family, and when returning I was always given buckets of shellfish and octopus for her dinner table.

### **Your style is often described as "observational", but it's a much more involved and personalised style of observation than, say, Frederick Wiseman's. Who or what have been the key influences on your filmmaking?**

It was at the 1978 Ethnographic Film Conference in Canberra that I first saw the work of Frederick Wiseman – also of Richard Leacock and the Maysles Brothers. I had never seen the direct cinema style before – the use of sync sound and hand-held 16mm cameras to construct a narrative unmediated by narration or interviews. That really appealed to me.

I'd been making community videos since 1974, but the technology was very basic. The black and white video cameras were lumpy and linked to a heavy recorder that was barely portable. The editing was extremely primitive – dubbing from one reel to reel machine to another. It was possible to make programs, but you had to stick to an edit script. Once you started [an edit] there was no going back. Ironically I switched from video to 16mm film for more creative control. Not only were the pictures far superior, but one could edit in a non-linear fashion on a Steenbeck [a film editing machine]. By that stage I had seen Curits Levy's *Sons of Namatjira* (1976), Maysles Brothers *Grey Gardens* (1975), and Gary Kildea's *Trobian Cricket* (1978) – all early works which influenced me.

I was restricted by budget so I could never do 'pure' direct cinema. I wanted to tell stories which allowed me to follow and observe a small number of carefully chosen characters taking on significant personal challenges. So I developed a signature style which was a mix of direct cinema, interview and montage. *Kemira – Diary of a Strike* in 1984 was the first film in this hybrid observational style.

I honed this approach over the next 20 years, and *Homelands* (1993), *Billal* (1996), *The Diplomat* (2000), *Molly and Mobarak* (2003) and *The Hungry Tide* are my most personally satisfying films in this genre. They were challenging films to make. You have to allow the story to develop organically and develop a really good relationship with your characters. You have to always keep second-guessing the narrative. If you ever miss a critical scene, there's no going back. I always start editing early to find out if the characters are really working and to start structuring the story. Often, by the time I shoot the final scene – for instance, the flooding of the small village in *The Hungry Tide* – the film is already at rough cut stage. Ray Thomas has been my editor and we've worked together since the late 80's. Our close collaboration has been crucial to the success of each and every film.

**To what extent do you regard your films as collaborations between you and your subjects?**

Let's say it's a journey we take together. I really feel it's not a process you impose on someone else. The rules are made as filming progresses and it's different from film to film. I recall an occasion with Maria when I filmed her at a party relaxing after a taxing conference in Germany. I could tell from a frown she gave me that she did not want to be filmed. I continued for maybe 30 seconds before switching off. It was 30 seconds too much. I got the cold shoulder for several days after that, and I knew I could never use the scene.

In *Molly & Mobarak* it was a similar process, but the relationship between myself and Mobarak, Molly and Lyn [Molly's mother] was much more complex. Whenever I tried to probe Lyn's feelings about Mobarak on camera she would refuse to be drawn, and I gradually became aware of the control Lyn was exercising over the filming process. This to and fro tussle over the filming was not something we ever spoke about, but looking back it was clearly an example of a main character trying to wrest some degree of control away from the filmmaker. I understood it and accepted it, though it was frustrating at the time.

**At the time of *Molly & Mobarak* you were quoted as saying, "To be able to make this sort of film you have to win the subject's trust, and assure them they have the power of veto over the final cut." Yet in the 1980s you were involved in a very public dispute with the ACTU over your film *Amongst Equals*. At that time you defended your right to represent the organisation in the way you saw fit. Is this the difference between making a film about an organisation and an individual?**

There is a tremendous difference between making a film with an organisation and a very personal film with a small group of characters. However in both cases 'accuracy' and 'fairness' are the two basic criteria that one must always consider. You have a responsibility to your subjects, but also to history.

*Amongst Equals* was a documentary about the history of the Australian Trade Union movement commissioned by Film Australia in 1980 and sponsored by the ACTU. After months consulting with a range of historians and union identities I wrote the script, which was subsequently approved. I then shot the film and got it to rough cut, but the ACTU became very obstructionist and started making quite unreasonable demands. I was prepared to compromise up to a point, but it became perfectly clear that there was a political agenda at play, and they wanted a hagiographic account. The project then sat on the shelf for a year and in desperation I 'stole' it from Film Australia, organised screenings and started distributing it myself. My defence was that I had the moral duty to publish a truthful account vetted by historians, as opposed to one slanted to a political outcome, which at that time was the Accord. Recently (only 22 years later) there are now moves being made to complete and update the film – with funding coming from the ACTU itself. An incredible stroke of irony!

**Do you generally allow your subjects the right of veto over the final cut? Apart from your work with the unions, has this ever led to problems in completing a film?**

In films about people and relationships, I have a personal rule that I can't go ahead and release it without the characters feeling that they've been fairly represented. I also know that by the time I've spent 18 months with someone they are not going to turn around and say, "Sorry, I withdraw my consent." However, screening the film to one's participants is probably the most stressful part of production. You're never quite sure what people are going to take issue with. Most issues have been minor and manageable, except in *The Hungry Tide*. There was one scene which involved a member of Maria's family behaving anti-socially. Maria wanted it removed because it betrayed the family's honour. In spite of its importance the scene had to go.

**You began your career in the community video movement, and your work has continued to focus on social issues. Do you still believe documentary film can function as an agent of change in society?**

Back in the early 70s black and white video portapak made it possible to make short documentary "comments" on various social issues, like the social upheavals caused by developers in Sydney's inner west. Those were the Green Ban days. A group of us made videos, and screened them in halls, pubs, wherever people gathered. In many ways we followed on the heels of the Waterside Workers Film Unit that screened films in a similar fashion in the 1950s. We made the tapes partly for self expression, but also as agit-prop – to bring people together to rouse debate. Those days are long gone, replaced by the far more effective internet. The videos posted during the Arab Spring were not dissimilar in spirit to what we were trying to do.

Long-form auteur-driven docs can also make a difference – take Michael Moore's work. It's great when a television airing or theatrical run ignites debate, but I never discount a film's life beyond its main release. *Molly & Mobarak*, eight years after its making, is regularly screened in universities and schools around Australia. Being a documentary that puts a human face to the refugee experience, I like to believe it's changed many people's attitudes, or at least given them something to think about.

**Although many of your films have aired on Australian television, in your acceptance speech for the 2010 Stanley Hawes Award last year you stated, "It's my impression the ABC and SBS documentary slots are becoming more prescribed and rigid. Programs are tending to be format-driven, and lighter in content." Do you see any sign this situation has changed in the 18 months since you made that statement?**

With a new Chairman at the helm, plus a new CEO, there is much anticipation that SBS will change for the better. They have announced they've gone back to their charter and commissioning documentaries on multi-cultural Australia, but my fear is that these will take the form of yet more of the same: 'content-lite' series. Admittedly, the exception has been *Go Back To Where You Came From*, a home-grown format which was smart, well cast and provoked much discussion. Meanwhile ABC Documentaries appear to be commissioning stronger, more challenging work, plus the occasional feature-length, which is all very heartening.

Unfortunately the films I specialise in – character-based 'ob-docs' – are being pushed further and further back in the schedules. And when one is commissioned to make 52 minutes, 52 minutes it will be – regardless that the natural length might be 88. It pains me to have to re-version (i.e. butcher) a film like *The Hungry Tide* to fit television time-slots. The irony is that international distributors are crying out for feature length character-based documentaries, and film festivals around the world love them.

**What are you currently working on? Do you have any new projects in the immediate pipeline?**

I'm embarking on a feature documentary/on-line project with my Melbourne colleague John Hughes, to tell the story of the Filmmaker's Cooperatives which operated in most state capitals in the 1970s and early 80s. Both John and I experienced this period first hand. The main focus will be the Sydney Filmmakers Co-op, which was the largest, most active, and stayed open the longest. The project will examine the history of the co-ops, and their aesthetic concerns in a period when filmmakers were typically engaged with a range of social/political issues like land rights, feminism, gay liberation, community activism, and the labor movement. We've already started shooting interviews with some of the key figures like Albie Thoms, Martha Ansara and Phil Noyce.