

Salvadorean Waters

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I think you did it very well. I think it worked well. The music was terrific too. You said you shot over eleven months. Were you editing in between all those shoots?

We had about four periods of editing. I always do this in my films, combine shooting and editing. It's very useful to see the shape the film is taking as the story develops in its usual uncontrollable way. We had a period of editing after the first initial exploratory shoot. The second shoot comprised of four visits to Melbourne over a period of about three months at the end of which there was a further period of six weeks editing. Then Maria made the decision to go to El Salvador. We went back with her for three weeks. When she came back we cut solidly from October till February, so all up about twenty weeks editing. And then the run to the line – the last six weeks where we got people like yourselves in for finecut screenings. This period is absolutely crucial, particularly when you think you've got the structure working, and it's quite apparent that you still haven't. The shape of the film changed dramatically in those final weeks.

When was your last period of shooting?

December last year – just two days for an update as to what was happening in their lives. It was on the very final day that Maria told me she wanted to make a statement about the filming process. When we eventually cut the scene, it seemed obvious she should have the last word and finally replace me as narrator.

I liked the way you did the narration. It must have been hard to decide just how much of yourself to use.

It was. I had never written narration

before and I was quite terrified of the whole process. I decided to treat the narration as a formal device, that is, I wanted to do it like a diary... "this is what happened. This is how I felt about them and what they thought about me." So it was done like that in the past tense, which in turn gave me the idea of filming myself at the Steenbeck looking at the footage. I got some assistance from some terrific writers like Michael Brindley, Karin Altmann, and George Pappaelinas. Writing the narration was a very liberating, freeing technique. Not only did it solve some problems of content and structure but it created a new layer of meaning in the film. For instance, when Carlos turned his back on me in El Salvador, I knew then I was inextricably involved in their relationship. Things were unfolding on camera that I needed to comment on. It would have been ethically and morally wrong in a film like this to have excluded myself from it. In earlier films I've made I used to feel that it was sufficient that my presence was acknowledged by occasional offscreen questions. But now I believe the more you enter and reveal people's lives, the more you're obliged to "enter" the film yourself.

Yes, absolutely. That's right. Where your presence is obviously very strong. But tell me, did Maria and Carlos ever see the film before it was finished?

Yes they did. I felt it was part of my social and ethical obligation as a filmmaker. The material was so private, so personal and so revealing that they both had to see it to make sure they were comfortable with what we had made, and that there wasn't any misrepresentation or distortion. It was personally very challenging for me because I didn't know how they would react. I went down and there was Maria with six or seven friends – mainly community workers like herself. In the end they patted Maria on the back for her terrific courage. Maria felt good about that. We had a discussion about some minor changes but that was it.

What about Carlos?

He was OK about the film and I think he's also gained a lot of self-confidence through the whole process. When he came on stage at the State Theatre, I was amazed at just how forward he was. He wasn't hiding behind Maria. He told me later he felt there were a lot of people that were sympathetic and understood his point of view. The process of making the film was psychologically empowering for both of them, but especially for him.

The film of course hasn't been released yet so there's that to come, what the critics will say and how they respond to that. Which is a whole new process for them.

There have already been critics – the people in their own community. And that's been a very interesting process. The first couple of weeks after the Melbourne Film Festival screening were very awkward. I held back from ringing Maria. That was my mistake. I should have been right in there supporting her. Eventually I rang her. She said: "Why haven't you called before?" And I felt guilty that I hadn't. She went on to tell me the more conservative sections of the community had been giving her a hard time for suggesting there were a lot of males in the Salvadorean community who were perpetrators of domestic violence. Mind you, a lot of people in the community also admired her bravery for taking the stand that she did. I think the film has been successful precisely because it has raised this controversy.

You said before that the film took many twists and turns and involved much more shooting and time than you imagined. I believe this is often an indication that you're onto a really good subject and therefore the film's going to be a lot better in the end. Given that you're operating on a fixed budget, you're almost being penalised for the extra effort that you're putting into the film to make it better. If you hadn't been able to finish the film in the budget that you'd originally got, what would have happened then, do you think? Could you have gone back to the FFC or to SBS and asked them to re-examine the situation?

I think the FFC are very hardline about cost overruns. With the oldstyle AFC it used to be possible, but the FFC doesn't tolerate it. The last thing I wanted to do was have Completion Guarantors involved and breathing down my neck. When the budget started to run tight I just took on all the roles myself. I still didn't have a film after sixty rolls, so I decided to take over the sound recording myself. I'd done the same on *Friends & Enemies*. There was no room for a camera assistant and it was really just down to me and Joel. We stayed with friends and forgot about hotels. It stayed like that for the whole of the next sixty or seventy rolls. *Which is all that counts – the number of rolls and the amount of time you've got.*

It's absolutely all that counts. And the

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the films we've got is this sort of sci-fi-shlock-horror-cult movie which will be very popular.

What's it called?

It's called *Flaming Ears*. It's an Austrian film. It's quite over the top, a tacky underground lesbian S&M, you name it, that's it.

You are planning two forums, as well. What kind of structure are they going to have?

What we wanted was to have possibly two speakers and a respondent, and some of the speakers confirmed are Chris Berry, Jane Goodall, Jyanni Steffenson, and our special guest, filmmaker Kris Clarke (whose documentary on Sandra Bernhardt, *Confessions of a Pretty Lady*, is screening). But it's not going to be everyone standing up and talking about what their version of queer is; we'll have a more directed discussion. I think that as soon as you actually seek a definition of any term, you get caught up

more one can do oneself on the film, the more it frees you up to film longer to really get the story that you're after. You just can't stop – I mean there's no way I could not have gone to El Salvador, even though the money really wasn't in the budget.

It bothers me to think that cost overruns and time overruns are so often seen as an irresponsibility on the part of the filmmaker where in fact, in your case, as is what happens so often with good documentaries, it's very necessary – I mean the subject demands it and that's why the film ends up being good. You could have stuck more rigorously to what you'd said you'd do, but made a film that was half as good and which I think is a very unfortunate situation. I suppose it bothers me to hear how you did it on such a modest budget of \$250,000, earning \$35,000 yourself for two years work. Now at the end of it, it's being distributed by Film Australia, I think? So there are no returns for you in that.

I think the way you and Bob do it has to be seriously considered – being the overseas distributor of your own films. You can at least compensate yourself for that huge personal commitment and the inevitable budget overrun. There is only a limited market for feature documentaries and there are only a small number of territories where sales can be made – although these of course are quite sizeable sales. One could argue that the filmmaker could quite easily set up those deals and make those sales themselves and be paid the normal distributor's commission. The FFC are now actually admitting that as a possibility and that's quite farsighted of them. All the time as a filmmaker you're thinking how long you've got till the money runs out. So you madly try to get the next film up, like I'm doing at the moment. Rushing headlong into something can be dangerous. There's also an important psychological process that has to occur. It's important to distance yourself emotionally from the last film. It's inevitably been a very intense and even harrowing experience, especially at the end. You need a break that you never get.

I must say, Tom, I thought it was a terrific – really wonderful film. And I congratulate you. I really think it was a huge advance on what you've done previously. It's a real breakthrough for you.

It has given me the confidence to embark on another probably very difficult film. I'm not as scared as I might have been before, especially entering people's lives and making decisions and forming bonds and inserting myself into the film through a subjective narration. I also feel more confident about making the crucial decision about the actual subjects for the film as well looking into the crystal ball and guessing what might be happening in their lives in six months time. I believe it's one of the secrets of making a good film in this particular narrative style.

with a particular way of discussing it that you can't actually escape from because you're looking for that definition. At the Sydney Film Festival and at Mardi Gras every year there hasn't been any discussion about the films or the gay and lesbian events that have been held over the last couple of years. So what we're doing is taking some of that material and putting it in a context where you will get a discussion.

What will happen after this particular event; will queer screen continue past this one festival?

Yes. We're funded by Mardi Gras. We'll have an event at Mardi Gras next year and it'll possibly be screenings, but it will be smaller, and it will also involve an arena for discussion. What I should say about our February event is that it will focus on Australian work. And that's where we'll be talking more specifically about production and distribution in Australia as well.

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