

## Transcription of an interview with Tom Zubrycki on the making of "Molly & Mobarak"

### Published on-line in AFC News 2004

S: For you as a filmmaker, what is the aim of documentary?

T: I think that as a documentarian you use your skills to enlighten, to provoke, to entertain, to tell a good story - but more importantly you have a moral responsibility to contribute to a shared humanity whether its to sensitise people to cultural understanding or to illuminate social inequality. For me its also very important for the audience to make an emotional connection with my film.

SR: As a medium that is, for you, fundamentally aimed at being provocative, is documentary then automatically political?

TZ: It's not automatically political because that provocation can be at that very individual, subjective level. It depends on how you define political. It can mean that people go one step further and, organise themselves together for a purpose to effect change. But at a subjective level, it can also mean that deepening somebody's understanding about an issue documentary can, over a period of time, lead to change.

SR: Why do you approach issues in an emotional narrative way?

TZ: That is probably the way I have worked over the last fifteen, twenty years with possibly a few exceptions - one being Amongst Equals. It's the way I feel comfortable working as a filmmaker. I've always looked for subjects and situations where there is flux and change - points of transition or rites of passage. Telling stories about real people is incredibly satisfying, but of course its always fraught with difficulty because you have to be at the right place at the right time, and I prefer not to use reconstruction.. Its always about choosing the right moment to film.

SR: Is that partly what makes observational documentary unique?

TZ: The thing about observational documentary is that it's got a closer connection to the 'real' than other forms of documentary. We're not talking about *truth* necessarily but *fidelity* (a term Gill Leahy uses in an article on observational filmmaking) . There's an expectation on the part of an audience that they're not going to be fooled, they're not going to be deceived. That what you, as a filmmaker, are showing them is something that is generally faithful to

the events that actually occurred – apart from your own spin on them, of course. The other important point is that documentary gives you the time to engage at that very basic face-to-face everyday level with your subjects and to build up a relationship with them. I think it's something documentary makers do that people working in other areas of non-fiction don't and that is part of its enduring allure. In a world of quick turn-around current affairs reporters will tend to think more of what their subjects are going to say and how that will fit in a thesis that has already been scripted. Observational documentary filmmaking is more of an exploration. The 'script' is born at the very moment of pointing a camera at someone and rolling tape. One is being *lead along* by the subjects rather than *driving* them.

SR: When you talk about the subjects leading you, at what point are you imposing a narrative structure as opposed to teasing out the narrative elements of these people's lives?

TZ: In some ways it is a fine line. True you don't want to impose a structure on a situation you may not yet be familiar with. However once you begin shooting you need to start thinking in terms of sequences and you start putting those sequences into a structure which serves to guide you to what next to shoot. After a while you might think you know the people so well that you are expecting events to happen and they don't - something else happens! It's that necessity to accommodate the unexpected, which to me is probably the most exciting moment in documentary because it's... it's those unplanned moments that take documentary to a different level. And it's those same moments that a script writer would find it hard to write into a screenplay - and yet they happen in real life. And you're behind the camera thinking 'I could never ever have predicted this'.

S: Did you have any of those moments with **"Molly and Mobarak"**?

T: The moment I didn't predict was Mobarak's final exit from Young. He decides to leave the people who have given him comfort for so many months, who've been like a second family to him. Plus he also leaves his other Hazara friends behind. It's a mark of kind of extraordinary bravery and, I would say, maturity. He knows that he can't win-over Molly's affections, and to live in the same town would make life very hard because there's no way he can avoid seeing her. So he has no option but to leave and start a new life.

S: I mean, it's certainly a very poignant story but by turns you have hope for Australia because there are these good people who are pro-active in helping the Afghani refugees, although of course there is also this background of negativity in the town and outside, so the political context for an Australian audience is quite powerful. How did American audience look at 'Molly and Mobarak' at Margaret Mead?

T: I sat in the audience and was relieved that they were responding as if 'on cue' and in all the 'right' places. The scene where Lyn and Molly gently push Mobarak out the door is a very uncomfortable moment and always gets a reaction. When it does I know that people are right *in* the film. A few people picked-up on the film's theme of unrequited love as a metaphor for the relationship between Australia and the foreigner i.e. they fall in love with the place but are in the end rejected. Its something that I always thought was an important underlying theme. Many were also fascinated with the country town atmosphere - the parade, the marching bands. They'd never seen anything like that before in an Australian film. Overall I felt very heartened that the film seems to cross borders really easily. The issue of refugees and asylum is the issue of our age and one that all developed economies are having to confront. It also helps that the film approaches this issue from an unusual vantage point - that of a love story. Everyone can connect with a love story. The response at Toronto and Amsterdam was pretty much the same. The Dutch do get a bit forensic though. Someone once asked me a question about the exit sign in the frame in the scene in the mayor's office and whether it had any symbolic meaning. To tell you the truth I had never noticed that exit sign before!

S: With Mobarak, did you find it quite difficult dealing with a subject that was not fully articulate in English? Was that a particular problem for you? Did you consider have him talk in Afghani and having an interpreter, or what was your process in deciding that?

T.: Mobarak's grasp of English was sufficient for him to understand me and for me to understand him. But you're right - he doesn't become really articulate in his own language till towards the end of the film. Bur that was my intention in the way I structured the film. Early-on I wanted the audience to see him from Lyn and Molly's point of view, so he appears incredibly vulnerable and dependent on the family. They help him get his license, they pour affection on him, they allow him to fall in love - and then complications begin. We see him becoming very confused and thus even more vulnerable. But he pulls through that and later we see him become much more self-assured. This is brought home in the scene where he presents, via a lawyer, his case to Immigration as to why he should remain in the country. Suddenly and almost unexpectedly he comes across as very articulate in his own language about his very dire predicament. We find things out about his family dispersed through central Afghanistan, about what it means to be a Hazara, and the awful dangers he will face if he's forced back. It's a bit of back-story that I keep from the audience and choose my moment to reveal it. It just happens later rather than earlier in the film - counter to the orthodoxy. Its like I'm writing a story from the available 'evidence' and colouring it through the deliberate choice I make in the editing.

S: Molly, she, herself, is actually quite reticent...

T: Yes.

S: ...and certainly you get a sense whereby there is a degree of internal conflict there about just how much she really likes Mobarak. She may have sent him mixed messages, and that's what confuses him - as it would, I am sure, any 'fella'. Did you find that? Did you find that it was difficult to draw Molly out emotionally because she actually is sort of a bit wary.

T: She was very wary. But she was also confused about her feelings for Mobarak. I think there was a genuine feeling of wanting to help, to be a person who could give him some sort of emotional support - but a few romantic elements crept in. Initially it was an overwhelming desire to embrace Mobarak to be part of the family without any kind of romantic complication. It was naïve for her to think that, but I believe she was also genuinely attracted to Mobarak, as she says herself in the film "things get complicated the more time you spend together". She wanted a bit of space and that's partly why she chose to go overseas. The scene on the eve of her departure when Mobarak is being gently pushed out of the house was an extremely difficult moment for everybody concerned and that's why it's so excruciating to watch.

S: How were you able to negotiate to be able to film that scene?

T: I found myself getting deeper and deeper access to the family as the weeks went by. The turning point came when Lyn allowed me to film the sequence where she basically lays down the ground rules to Mobarak about his contact with Molly, and tells him the sad, awful truth that Molly is not for him. That was a sequence which wouldn't have been possible to film had I not been actually living in the house. The fact that I was allowed to film the kitchen conversation meant that it was easier to film on subsequent nights when emotions became more highly charged. In the end it was all down to winning trust - something that all observational filmmakers have to do. However there were times when I couldn't film, when I had to put the camera down, in particular when Mobarak came up as the subject of conversation. It was quite simple - Lyn would just tell me to put the camera away and we'd have a big laugh. Even though Lyn often remarked on my 'invisibility' she knew very well what I was doing. If you look closely at the scene with her and Mobarak over the kitchen table you notice that she sometimes looks across at the camera. You can read her mind: 'should I tell him to go or allow him to stay?' It was uncomfortable for her. It was uncomfortable for me. It's often assumed that subjects have no power to say 'no' - nothing can be further from the truth. Sometimes I wondered to myself -

who's really in control - is it me or them, but it always a bit of both and it always involves give and take. Its different in every film. Sometimes with Jose in "**The Diplomat**" I had very little control because it was so hard getting access into particular situations. Of course people get used to you and you to them. Lyn and Molly became quite involved in the filming process even to the point of calling me to tell me things were about to happen. As it turned out they were quite comfortable to have me around a lot. We became firm friends and I'm still a regular visitor in their home.

S: This I think touches on the ethical issues involved. At what point, as a filmmaker, does your intimate relationship with your subjects become, or can it become, complicity?

T: I think that's an interesting question. Actually, I felt I was put in a position of being complicit with Lyn and Molly at the time that Mobarak was gently pushed out of the house. I often wonder what would have happened had I decided to go with him rather than staying inside with the two women. You know, whose side was I really on? Making a doco like this means inevitably you're always thrown-in to a complex situation where tensions and emotions are running high. I wanted to get perspectives from all sides. When Ray and I were editing the film we were seeing the story unfold from Lyn and Molly's point of view. But then it changed and the point of view shifted to Mobarak. This was a conscious decision in the shooting and something that I reinforced through the editing. I had actually shot more sequences with Mobarak and his friends and so on which, in the end, I chose not to use.

S: What did those sequences reveal when you were filming them?

T: They revealed a group of men living in a flat, coming home from work, getting up in the morning, going to work, all of that. It was not crucial to my story to show that. There were other sequences though that I did include like the men having dinner together. The fact that Molly & Lyn were invited guests made the eating scene integral to the story as well as commenting on cultural difference. In the second half of the film its the absence of his flat mates and their jollity that is symbolic. Mobarak is on his own - working things out.

S; The scene where they colour Mobarak's hair is totally unexpected. It just comes out of the blue.

T: Again its a scene that if I hadn't stayed in the house I would have missed. Its also a highly symbolic sequence because it comments on the lengths he's prepared to go to change and become an 'aussie boy', as Lyn calls him. Lyn and Molly are doing it to Mobarak but he is very much the complicit party. He *wants*

*it to happen* as well. And he also realises the costs. I mean, Molly asks him 'what are so-and-so and so-and-so going to think of you?' And he says 'well, I don't think they are going to like it.' And they're the people in his flat. And then Lyn teases out the fact that he's no longer really practicing Ramadan or prayer - that he's changed. So suddenly we realise that he's turned his back on a great deal of his own culture. But the irony is that he's not accepted wholeheartedly by Australians either. The next scene that evokes that very strongly is when he's wandering through that country fair. He's looking around and it's patently obvious he's got little in common with the people in the crowd.

S: Yes. That's certainly a very interesting sequence that. Because he does seem forlorn actually. He doesn't look very happy being there. What kind of negotiation did you have with Lyn? Because, she's the third element to the film and to the story? I felt, to a certain extent, that she was performing for the camera occasionally. Did you feel that or is that my imagination?

T: I believe there's a performative element in all documentaries. People are conscious that they do things on camera that might be slightly different to what they would do when the camera is not there. And... and, yes, there is that quality with Lyn. That sometimes she does 'perform', 'rise to the occasion', become perhaps slightly 'larger than life'. Although, she also is that sort of person. She's incredibly open, warm, friendly. An English documentary theorist Stella Bruzzi talks about 'performance'. She talks about documentaries being "performative acts whose truth comes into being only at the moment of filming". I think I would agree with that, not to say, or course, that things would automatically play out differently if the camera weren't there.

S: Have you, in your experience as a documentary filmmaker, been in a situation where somebody is consciously performing for camera and that you have to deal with that as an issue?

T: I think Jose Ramos Horta in "**The Diplomat**" without a doubt. He was always performing in the sense that he always put on his 'media profile'. Luckily I managed to \ to film him in situations where he dropped his persona - but that wasn't possible all the time. Towards the end of the filming he completely dropped his guard. Particularly during those three critical days when I stayed with him in the "Bed and Breakfast" in Auckland during APEC. Dili was burning and he had to convince Indonesian president Habibie to allow in the multinational force. He was in the center of the storm but he also knew it was history in the making and it was important it was being recorded - and he was pleased I was around to do it.

S: I mean, it's certainly a very interesting negotiation and probably the crux, in a way, of the documentarian. 'How do you relate to your subjects?', is really the ethical issue at any one point in time. Would you agree with that?

T: As Brain Winston says the only ethical responsibility you have in a documentary is to your subjects, not to your audience. In a film like "**Molly & Mobarak**" I needed to be faithful to the events that actually occurred, even though I interpreted them according to the way I saw them. Integral to this process is showing the film to your subjects prior to completion. This can be a very confronting and awkward experience. I must admit I was very nervous in this last film when I showed the film to the three main characters. They were surprised, confronted and charmed at the same time. Not a frame was altered.

S: Can you impose yourself so much on the material that you actually could almost distort the kind of accepted version of events. I mean, people themselves can have...

T: Different perspectives. Absolutely..

S: ...on the same, same situation. There's you, your perspective. There's Lyn's perspective. There's Molly's perspective. There's Mobarak's perspective. All of which are all probability different. How do you work out which one to use?

T: If they're all contained in the film, then the film is valid and then of course you give your own as well.

S: That is the challenge?

T: Yes it is especially in a film where you're peeling back layer after layer after layer. The more you do that the harder it is to make a film which is going to please everybody – especially your main subjects. By the way I hate to use that word 'subjects' because you're in a situation where you are being influenced by them as much as the other way round. The subject becomes 'you' as much as it becomes 'them'.

S: Was there any small falling-out that you had with Molly or Mobarak or Lyn?

T: Not at all, but I know there were some people in the Afghan community who thought that maybe I shouldn't have focussed on somebody who renounced their background as much as Mobarak did because he didn't represent all Afghans who were refugees -many of whom actually held onto their beliefs.

S: Is this because they were worried that you were in a sense proposing a kind of assimilationist position?

T: Correct, but then again, Mobarak was a young person and he did represent the vast majority of the younger Afghans.

S: You had another family that you were following for a while?

T: Yes. They were another Australian family who were giving comfort to a man whose wife was on Nauru in an off-shore detention centre. His name was Javed. He was the one Tony Hewson was trying to find in the sequence where he's driving around in his truck. Javed left town quite early on and before I properly got to know him because of certain allegedly racially-motivated incidents. I couldn't really pursue his story very much except at a distance, although I entertained the idea for a long while to intercut his story with Mobarak's. My editor Ray Thomas felt it just wouldn't be structurally possible and he was right. Verite-narratives have their own inherent limitations!

S: What do you feel is the most successful aspect in your decision-making as a documentary filmmaker with '**Molly and Mobarak**'? And what are you least satisfied with in retrospect?

T: What I was most satisfied with was the fact that I found the story quickly. Making the love story the central narrative was a good decision. I knew straight away when I met Molly and Mobarak that separately their expectations from the friendship were unequal. Mobarak needed Molly more than Molly wanted him and that this would lead to an emotional crunch point down the track. Things would happen. There'd be movement. There'd be change and whatever happened would point in a powerful way at some underlying theme to do with the refugee experience, and that's what turned out! What I was least satisfied with was what I began to talk about before when you asked me who else I was following. To put it simply I couldn't quite find a parallel narrative which might have served to ironically mirror the main narrative. It was something I managed to get to work in some of my previous films - especially in "**Homelands**". In that film the young couple Maria and Carlos were going through a crisis in their marriage and Dario and Emma, the older couple, were doing the opposite - they were actually getting together. It also worked in "**The Diplomat**" where Ramos Horta's life is ironically mirrored in his mother's. Natalina is Jose's moral conscience - he refuses to compromise whereas Jose, her son, is the master of diplomacy. In "**Molly & Mobarak**" I still had two of parallel narrative strands - but they simply filled out the context to the love story. Focussing on the very resourceful Ann Bell gave me the opportunity to touch base with what the general support group was doing. While Tony Hewson plays a critical role in the film because its through him that we become aware of what the town feels about the Hazaras. I did actually find an older Hazara man who was a perfect

foil to Mobarak. He was very respectful of tradition, and somewhat cautious in his dealings with the Aussies. However he didn't to open up to me anything like Mobarak did, so I found it hard to get the sequences I needed. Perhaps this also says something about the limitations of the verite form.

S: Yes, okay. We've talked a lot about different ethical issues and how you position yourself in relation to your subjects and gaining access - the notions of intimacy and complicity. I'm interested in the issue of the cutaway - especially creating a scene by cutaways that are from another place or, from ten minutes later or ten minutes earlier from the scene you're shooting.

T: As long as the cutaways ring true emotionally they can be used regardless when they were shot - even 60 minutes earlier in the sequence one's shooting. When you're cutting it's obvious what fits and what doesn't. Shooting cutaway is actually a real problem in solo camera operation because you can't just pan across to a cutaway when you might want otherwise people become 'off-mike'. So it forces you to become very attentive to the conversation you're filming. People tend to repeat themselves often in conversation, so you look for those moments to sneak in cutaways, but it's important that they reflect the right emotional response. This is the first film I've almost entirely shot myself and it was very liberating but yes the cutaway and getting adequate coverage for the editor is a technical issue that one has to overcome.

S: I have some general questions for you, in terms of yourself as a documentary filmmaker and your own sort of history in documentary. What are the documentaries that have most inspired you?

T: Probably, when I first started in documentaries, the ones that inspired me were films made by the early exponents of what is called 'direct cinema' or 'cinema verite' - Leacock & Pennebaker "**Don't Look Back**", the Maysles Brothers "**Salesmen**" and Fred Wiseman "**Titticut Follies**" as well as the Dutch director Joris Ivens "**Spanish Earth**" and "**Rain**" - he comes from a totally different even earlier tradition before mobile sync sound.

S: What about more recently?

T: Well there's been Molly Deneen and Nick Broomfield. Their earlier works mainly - Molly's **Home on the Hill** and Nick's "**The Leader, the Driver and the Driver's Wife.**" More recently films like "**Crazy**" by the great Dutch director Heddy Honigmann Errol Morris never ceases to inspire me and his new film that I saw in Toronto "**The Fog of War**" about ex-US Defence Secretary McNamara is a masterpiece. In terms of Australian work Bob Connolly and Robin Anderson's "**Black Harvest**" and "**Facing the Music**" are standouts.

S: Yes. What of your documentaries, that you have made, do you feel is the most successful documentary and why?

T: Oh God. "**The Diplomat**" got a lot of awards, but I think that '**Billal**' and '**Homelands**' are certainly the most satisfying. They are my best works because of their narrative complexity. I have the main story line and also have other characters reflect the main story line. '**Homelands**'. I talked about that earlier

S: Has it always interested you, that idea of displacement?

T: Well it's certainly been an issue that I have explored in the nineties, and from the nineties onwards. The impact on refugee and migrant families wrought by displacement, community conflict and social change. In a sense it's something that is about me as, given my background, as somebody whose parents are not Australian born (my father escaped occupied Poland in 1939). But it's also interesting because nobody else was tackling these issues and I saw that as kind of fertile territory - certainly not in a verite form anyway

S: What about the future. Will you always be sticking to these themes and working in an observational style?

T: Sometimes I feel like I'm making the same film over and over again. Perhaps I am, but I feel I'm just getting better and better at it. In "**Molly & Mobarak**" I implied a lot of things to happen just outside the frame. It's a much simpler purer film than many of my others - but the emotional and psychological layers are complex and add a richness to the film of a kind I've seldom been able to achieve. In my next film I may move in a less narrative direction, but time will tell. I don't really know. I'm currently looking forward to working with some emerging talented younger directors and producing their films as well as teaching at UTS, but I predict I'll be shooting my own stuff again by the end of the year.

## REFERENCES

"New Documentary - a critical introduction" by Stella Bruzzi Routledge 2000  
" Fidelity, Faith and Openness - rescuing Observational Documentary" by Gillian Leahy in Media International Australia no 82 November 1996  
"Claiming the Real" by Brian Winston British Film Institute 1995

S