

## **“Profession, privilege and passion”**

### **Presented at “Persistence of Vision”. The Australian Screen Director’s Conference 2002**

After making documentaries for 25 years certain things change, one grows hopefully wiser and more intuitive, technically more adept and financially more secure. However the longer I remain a filmmaker the greater feel the sense of moral compunction to mentor talented emerging filmmakers.

Krystof **Kieslowski** was spot on when he de-mythologised the glamour of directing” it’s a nerve-wrecking business and, at a certain point, everything else has to come second, including your family, emotions, private life....”

Certainly for me filmmaking is being riddled with self-doubt. Its tossing and turning about the scene you’re going to shoot that day tortured by the possibility that suddenly the people you’ve been filming with might suddenly decide to back out, then when you come back to the office you’re facing mountains of paper work, the PIA, legal agreements, completion guarantors. You’ve already started shooting 4 months ago with a camera you’ve purchased on your credit card with no firm letter of a pre-sale. Meanwhile the editor has already stated and you’re paying him out of your own pocket!

I never thought of filmmaking as a profession – more as a passion – something I had to do. (It became a profession later). When you’re passionate about something you take risks. I thought nothing of ploughing all my savings into a film – When I made KEMIRA-DIARY OF A STRIKE I started off with \$3,000 back in 1982. The film couldn’t wait

Back then all of us worked on each other’s films. It wasn’t difficult to find people prepared to work for deferred wages. The funding scenario was totally different: there was only one port of call and that was the AFC. Broadcasters weren’t taking on independent films anyway - completely the reverse of the situation now. So after 2 weeks of filming I turned up at the AFC with what I thought were the best two rolls I could afford to print. The AFC decided to invest, and eventually the film went on to win an AFI award and was one of the first independent docs to be purchased by the ABC.

Back then *making* the film was important. It was tacitly understood that to be a doco director you were lucky just to make a living – nothing more. It didn't seem to matter as long as you were doing it.

But after 25 years working in the industry, one feels one is entitled to have certain expectations. One is aware that one is never to get rich from filmmaking, but at least one has the expectation have some level of income security. That this doesn't come automatically is a shock and is a reason why many people are forced to stop directing and leave the industry.

Over the years I've evolved several strategies on how to survive financially. I'm not saying that this is a path every filmmaker should go down. Each film is different: everything from the personal essay shot on mini-do, to the scripted re-enactment, to the interview-based.

## **1. Multi-skilling, and investing in technology**

- I believe that stretching the production period and budget (either one or both) to the maximum limit is virtually mandatory for doco makers these days – especially event and character based films. It's important to be able to film for as long as possible, to be able to edit for as long as possible. It makes sense therefore to take on as many aspects of the total production process you. For instance it's becoming more the norm that directors are doing their own cinematography. I did this to some extent on THE DIPLOMAT and now I'm doing it exclusively on my current film. The freedom this gives me is quite liberating especially where you're working on a project that finds its shape and its viewpoint over a long period of observational filmmaking.
- Another aspect of financial survival is purchasing one's own equipment. Its now possible to buy an editing system for the same money it takes to hire one. Some people also edit their own films – although in my case, I would never do it. I demand at least one close collaborator and in my film it's the editor
- It's absolutely vital that every doco maker knows how to produce. The ins and outs of the financing business at least within Australia are not that complicated. There is also no reason also why you can't be your own financial accountant after learning the basics of MYOB.

The filmmaker/academic **Michael Rabiger** was out here earlier this year. He made a somewhat broad generalisation, but there is some truth in it. He compares the documentary filmmaker in the 21st century to what the writer was in the 20<sup>th</sup> century – both are storytellers commenting on the society around them - just substitute a pen for a camera.

### **3. Mentoring other filmmakers and producing their work.**

To me this question is not only about economics. Its also about morals and ethics - what can I give back to the industry that has helped to given you a professional career as a filmmaker. When like me you've reached mid career, and after accumulating a body of work its incumbent one to pass on these skills to a younger body of filmmakers.

However, when I first decided to produce I didn't necessarily see it in this light. It fell into producing in 1995 at the time when the film I was making at the time BILLAL was stalled through a court case that hadn't been resolved. The film I'm referring to is EXILE IN SARAJEVO made by Tahir Cambis – a personal meditation on the city of Sarajevo at the end of the Balkan war. I was attracted to the idea because the filmmaker was so completely obsessive about making the film nothing would stop him. I was intrigued by this unbelievable determination. We discussed ideas. It wasn't easy – there were struggles and fights. He accused me of imposing a directorial style. We had a difficult time. He *suffered* me as a producer. He simply wanted to get his film made and I was the vehicle. Despite the angst it became a creative collaboration, or you could call it a jostle between two obstinate Slavs.

I seem to be attracted to first films - perhaps its something that I see in other people that used to *drive me* as a filmmaker. But I must say I've experienced great satisfaction at being able help fulfil somebody's creative vision - Rachel Landers, Darlene Johnson's and Gary Doust's.

One thing also one needs to admit as filmmaker - one can run-out of ideas. People come to you often with far better ideas than you would have thought up yourself. So why suffer a mid-life crisis, why not turn this into advantage for yourself and for them.

Basically my ideal situation is to work intensively on one project, and at the same time work as script editor or consultant producer with less

experienced filmmakers whose projects I see as having strong potential. Some of these projects I would later produce.

#### 4. **Engaging in risk-taking**

Armed with these survival strategies – like having your own equipment and producing on the side doesn't mean you shouldn't take risks as a filmmaker. It only means that jumping into a project suddenly becomes less risky - and more a considered gamble... more based on intuition and on experience.

#### **New opportunities in documentary.**

I'm actually quietly optimistic believing the situation for documentary has improved significantly over the last 2 years. I believe one thing that reality television has done is to make people hungry for real life and actuality. The interest in Docos has never been higher. An unprecedented number of docs are being released this year in Australia – **My Mother India**, David Bradbury's films and soon **Wedding in Ramallah** and later **Making Venus**. The same thing overseas. Jan Rofekamp, one of the world's most influential distributors notes:

- *"We are continuing to see growing cinema/festival audiences for documentaries worldwide.... The recent announcement by Sundance*
- *That they are creating a national documentary channel not only reflects greater interest in the genre in the US, but it will likely in time create even more interest in and larger audiences for top quality documentaries."*

However these successes are not reflected in the attitude of our main public broadcaster the ABC. I believe they treat us as content providers, rather than program makers. A 10 pm True Stories slot on a Thursday is a vote of no confidence in the doco community. How much farther back can we be pushed in the schedule! I see this as extremely dangerous – because if the ABC continues to marginalise our product, a situation may easily develop where the ABC will simply stop offering pre-sales.

I conclude by saying that as filmmakers we may be privileged, but unless we act as a body to gain the respect of broadcasters,

documentary filmmaking as an industry could suffer a severe contraction.