

## “REALTIME” ARTICLE 2004

There's always been a tradition of new documentaries being screened at Parliament House, Canberra. So it came as a surprise that Joint House leader Mr Wedgwood acting on the advice of the Speaker Neil Andrew rejected my film **Molly & Mobarak**. Wedgwood's letter (leaked to the Canberra Times) stated several reasons, including that "this film promotes the theme of widespread opposition to government policy and might cause offence to a significant part of the Australian community."

The ban was outrageous and it was subsequently overturned in 48 hours after pressure from my local Labor member Tanya Plibersek. Because of all the publicity Canberrans of course responded and we had a full cinema.

I've been trying to ask myself what significance to read into this petty attempt at censorship? Maybe one reason is bound up with the difference between documentary and current affairs. Current affairs is essentially an investigation driven by a reporter while documentary is more an exploration of the contemporary/historical through the personal. Perhaps the film struck a raw nerve because it actually humanised refugees.

I believe it's a sign that documentaries are starting to be noticed and taken seriously in the general community. Some claim its because documentaries are appropriating the devices of traditional story telling and bringing emotional power to the form. However, good documentaries have always done that. It's not a new thing. I think it's more that there's a real hunger to find meaning in the post Sept 11 world and there is a public craving for authenticity.

Last year I attended IDFA (the International Documentary Festival of Amsterdam) - the largest of its type in the world. 230 films were shown and 110,000 tickets were sold - a 17% audience leap over the previous year. IDFA is a celebration of the art of documentary - and the styles ranged from observational narratives to extremely personal essay films.

The resurgence of documentary is a phenomenon few could have predicted given its steady marginalisation on television. Since the mid 90's

documentary has been separating in two totally different directions: reality-based series and factual info-tainment, versus the traditional longer form social documentary which has been pushed back to ever later time-slots. This has been a world-wide trend. The extreme example is the BBC in Britain where social documentary has all but been forced onto a new digital channel. The situation in Australia hasn't yet reached this stage. SBS's new documentary strand "Storyline Australia" has been scheduled in prime time, and everyone is keen to see how it performs.

Traditionally there's always been an uneasy relationship between television and documentary. Television, by its very nature, constructs audiences as consumers. It tends to be prescriptive and concerned with ratings and the focus is on diversion and entertainment. Meanwhile documentary forces you to engage with the content - to think for yourself so that your imagination fills the gaps. It's got a strong and personal point of view and it's got complexity and depth. Certainly I would be the first to admit that without television we wouldn't have a documentary industry but my concern is - are we losing the *art* of documentary?

This year's Australian International Documentary Conference (AIDC) held in Fremantle in February is an example of this very problem. The Conference was essentially oriented around the business of buying and selling TV documentaries with the DocuMart being the core of the event. While I don't disagree this should have been the main focus, where were the sessions about form, the discussions with the filmmakers, the screenings? Only one documentary was ever shown at the festival - an appalling oversight by the organisers. No wonder that many younger filmmakers were completely alienated by the event seeing it as a club for established practitioners. This is a poor way of growing an industry, especially in the light of a shocking statistic revealed by the AFC that 64% of first time documentary filmmakers never get to make another film.

The difficulties faced by this current 'entry-level' generation to get a foothold in the industry accounts for an absence, I believe, of a variety of ideas and styles. People censor themselves, believing certain subjects are too "provocative" for broadcasters to commission and elect instead to make safer

films that they believe will get a better chance of getting funded. Broadcasters are also less inclined to take risks with first-time filmmakers.

Meanwhile a crisis also exists at the other end of the spectrum: Around the world the feature documentary is being revitalised, however here in Australia we are being left behind. Just look at the long list of feature docs slated to hit the screens in the next few months. All are American. Not one is a local film!

Maybe its time to start to think outside the box. In the U.S. feature projects usually start without any tv involvement. That comes later. Unlike America we don't have private foundations to kick-start these projects. We do however have government agencies : the AFC fully invests in one feature doc a year, the new Adelaide International Film Festival is investing \$100,000 in a project for next year's event, while the Film Finance Corporation has the capacity to invest in one feature documentary per year. Occasionally SBS allows one-hours docs to grow into features - most recently **Fahimeh's Story**.

It's a start but there's no guarantee these documentaries will ever hit the cinema screens (or even be shown in film festivals) and that's because broadcasters increasingly believe they will lose publicity, and therefore ratings, by not insisting on first run. Recently Ronin Films wanted to secure a theatrical window for **The President versus David Hicks** but to no avail. Because of its topicality SBS wanted the film to open its new "Storyline Australia" strand instead. The film rated very well but director Curtis Levy insists he will still press for a theatrical release later in the year

Meanwhile in America it's a different picture entirely. The US cable network Home Box Office (HBO) has visibly stepped up its involvement in cinema release of feature documentaries it has acquired e.g. **Spellbound** and **Capturing the Friedmans**. Cinema exposure guaranteed reviewers and critics gave these documentaries the attention they deserved, thus helping their eventual television release. At IDFA Sheila Nevins, HBO's CEO, noted that "If a film doesn't succeed theatrically it doesn't hurt television broadcast, and if it succeeds it helps".

Part of the problem of releasing feature docs here in Australia is the high cost of a 35mm blow-up. At AIDC Andrew Pike from Ronin Films referred to the box-office success of **My Mother India**. The film ran for 6 months in Sydney, but barely returned its blow-up costs (around \$60,000). In this Australia digital projection makes perfect financial sense, but venues for digital projection are strictly limited. That means feature docs finished on tape seldom attract mainstream distributors. In the case of **Molly and Mobarak** I was very lucky that Hopscotch came in behind the film, but the release wouldn't have happened without a marketing loan from the AFC.

One of the resolutions passed at the AIDC calls on the AFC to conduct a feasibility study into a European initiative which could be the answer to cinema release of documentaries. Three years ago the Netherlands Film Fund started "Docuzone". Digital projectors were purchased and lodged in cinemas across the country on the condition that they screen independent documentary and drama at least 2 nights a week. Not only did it work, it was a huge success. This year the Docuzone will link 175 screens across Europe via a digital network and a slate of 12 films to be simultaneously released from a central server. Kees Ryninks, who initiated the project said at IDFA: "we need to carve out a separate space for specialist film and to protect and promote European culture." Is this not a familiar echo? Haven't documentary makers here been saying the same thing for years!

Television may be the saviour of documentaries and it may also be its curse. Whatever happens, documentary urgently needs to re-claim its proper place as an art form. Documentary filmmakers have an incredible ability to make things from the inside - exploring the contemporary/historical through the personal using a rich variety of styles and approaches. While reality television has come and (almost) gone, documentaries are here to stay.

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