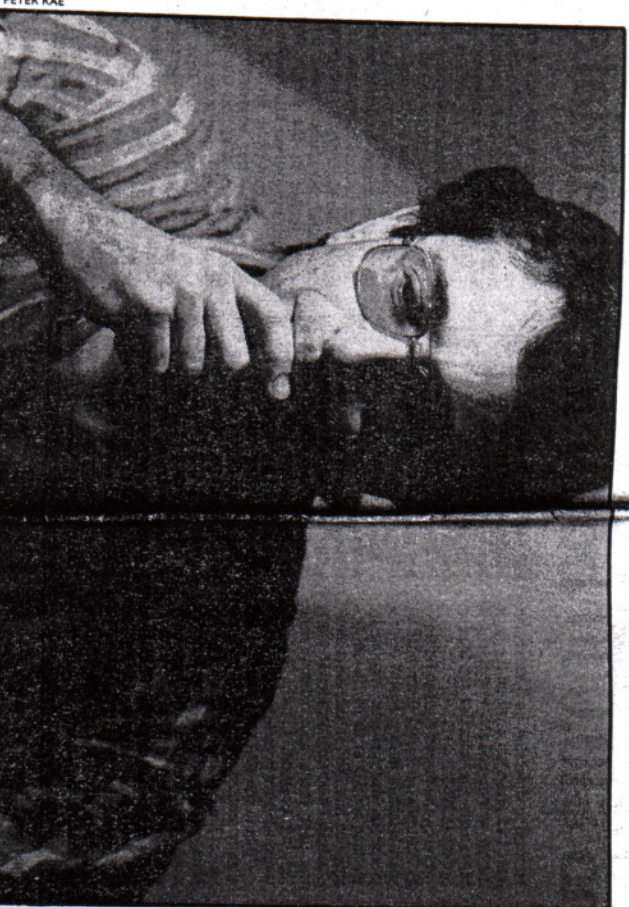


Two politically dedicated Australians, film-maker Tom Zubrycki and singer Jeannie Lewis, balance their left-wing beliefs with their art.

# Zubrycki zooms in on social inequalities and worthy causes

**I** WONDER if there's a fine line between idealism and masochism," ponders Tom Zubrycki, one of a rare breed in this country — a politically dedicated film-maker. Unlike his colleagues — David Iredbury, Dennis O'Rourke and others — who have opted to make films in rovable spots overseas, Zubrycki's ideological concerns have compelled him to stay in Australia, using film to expose the inequalities of the system and redress a little of the balance. Yet if he is to fulfil his goal of contributing to public debate and raising general awareness, he realises he must reach wider audiences. That, for any documentary film-maker in his country, is a struggle.

It's not that he's ungrateful about it following. His three films have enjoyed considerable success at film festivals and have received their share of awards. *Waterloo* (1981) won Best Documentary at the Greater Union awards, and *Kenira, Diary of a Strike* (1984) was named Best Documentary at the AFI awards (also best short at the Adelaide Film Festival). *Waterloo* was released in theatres and on television. His latest film, *Friends and Enemies*, was made on an on-screen documentary/fellowship, awarded to outstanding film-makers to encourage innovative work. The fellowship provided Zubrycki with a period and production money. So what he's got to complain about?



PETER RAE

Tom Zubrycki: "The best documentaries are made with a sense of outrage."

He does appreciate all this, but there persists the nagging anxiety of the idealist who doesn't want to cocoon himself by preaching only to the converted. And you realise it's not as ideal as it sounds when he tells you that he spent \$15,000 of his own money (a loan) completing *Friends and Enemies* — a probing investigation of the Queensland power dispute of 1985-1986 which led to the banning of virtually all union strikes in most industries in Queensland. "A worthwhile cause," he says of his investment.

His approach to film-making is investigative social conscience, "peeling back the layers of the core of events". He is convinced that if this is done successfully (and he is adamant it is not done by current affairs programs on television because of limited time and narrow focus), it is not difficult to offer a radical perspective on some aspect of society. "The best documentaries are made with a sense of outrage about some form of social injustice," he says. The causes he's taken up so far have been controversial — the battles by resident action groups against redevelopment in inner Sydney; a strike by coalminers in Wollongong against BHP; and Queensland power workers in conflict with the State Government and later their own representatives in the Trades and Labour Council. Although the issues in each case

have been localised on a State or community level, Zubrycki believes they possess wider relevance for Australians as social truths about the world they live in. "Who knows, it's their next day...?" But he finds it disappointing that so many Australians prefer to be socially or politically committed to overseas issues, preferring to overlook injustice in their own backyard.

"It's more comfortable, less confronting, I suppose," he says. He attributes this escapism to a "glossy, *National Geographic* view of the world" encouraged by sensationalist documentaries on commercial television, which reinforce the assumption that the lives of ordinary Australians are too mundane to create much interest.

## Lewis's political and personal life hum in a high key

**I**N the morning before a performance, Jeannie Lewis has her sunglasses. She attributes it to the ugly Canberra stage where she sang. Robert Roadknight were last

left-wing politics, visited the Soviet Union in 1934 and was impressed by socialist society. He worked for the Civil Rights movement in America in the 1960s. For 30 years he was

a *Dancer*, in 1982. My father was the leader of the NSW Teachers' Federation, and they were both very militant people. "I saw my mother with a..."

it's no different from here. As we have killed off the Aboriginals, they've allowed our natural resources to be

ira was to meet that need. The next two films provided Zubrycki with the opportunity to expose the myth of the power of trade unions by highlighting the plight of individuals or groups who take a stand against retrenchment or oppression, only to be met with punitive actions such as those used in the Queensland power dispute when Sir John Bogle-Petersen offered terms of return to work that were humiliating to the strikers. However, despite the similarities in subject of *Kenira* and *Friends and Enemies*, his approach differed considerably. "In *Kenira* it was obvious I favoured the miners perspective and consciously worked victim sympathy, but in *Friends and Enemies*, I tried to be more even-handed by allowing each side to speak on its own behalf without imposing a particular interpretation or hitting people on the head with ideas," Zubrycki says. "In that way my films require an active role for the viewer interpreting events, as they have been filmed directly (*Cinema verité*) yet juxtaposed with news clippings, archival material, camera interviews, re-enactments — a technique which relies on storytelling yet takes on a life of its own in the editing by the relationship of the different components to each other."

Zubrycki does confess to having played the devil's advocate, occasionally, when he couldn't resist the ironies and incongruities of the situation. "I tried to be provocative but open — it's a fine line to tread," he says. For example, there are scenes in *Friends and Enemies* in which, amid the turmoil and demonisation of the strikers, he cuts to Fio Bogle-Petersen and Lester at a debutante country ball on a round of social events dispensing worldly advice to debts and local schoolchildren.

"Using the personalised approach, the film-maker cannot avoid building a special relationship with the people who are going through a crisis, for whom the film may be the only voice of representing their cause to a wider public," Zubrycki says. "That's why I feel so responsible to show it as widely as possible. But it can put you in an awkward dilemma. It's hard not to be burdened. Devoting into people's lives at a time of stress can be difficult. "Really, documentary film-making can be quite a lonely experience as you try to assemble truths amid a lot of pressures."

Despite the power of film, Zubrycki sees the film-maker as powerless, at the mercy of institutions such as distributors and television networks to provide theatrical release, and reliant on the press to allocate sufficient information and coverage without which a film can be the "best-kept secret in town".

He acknowledges that television is the ideal medium for a larger audience but, although he is grateful that the fellowship documentaries have been bought by the ABC, he says that the manner of their release is, at this stage, far from ideal. He feels angered at being asked to cut his film from 87 to 60 minutes just so it can fit into a suitable format slot such as Anne Deverson's documentaries.

The frustrations and the desire to extend his creative potential have led him to consider turning to feature films but he insists that they will still be issue-oriented — "No wild escapades to fantasy".

He already has two projects under way — one called *Favours* with Graham Pitas and another with historian Wendy Lowenstein (mother of film-maker Richard), based on her book of oral histories of the Depression, *Wheels in the Hour*.

In the meantime, *Friends and Enemies* is scheduled to open in Melbourne at the State Film Theatre on Wednesday and Brisbane's Schonele Cinema on Thursday. Many eyes will be on Queensland to observe its reception. Zubrycki hopes "it will be provocative and open the issue which is now dead and buried so that the film can authenticate the role of the rank and file who can so easily be written out of history at such a great cost to their own lives."

"There's a lot in it," he says. "Let's hope for large audiences so that others can apply the final words to their experience. You're the wiser for it!"

— MARY COLBERT