

“MOLLY & MOBARAK” - an article for IF magazine by Bec Barry

Most of us would remember from three years ago the compelling television and print images of refugee boat people stranded off the coast of Australia or the riots and self-mutilation cases at the Woomera Detention Centre. What most of us probably do not know is what happened next? Ever since that initial media hysteria the public interest odometer on the issue of refugees in Australia seems to have fallen by the wayside.

Which is why Tom Zubrycki's latest documentary film *Molly and Mobarak* is such a powerful film. Made to remind us of the on going problems refugees face in the community and their assimilation into Australian society. The film is an unrequited love story involving a young Afghan man Mobarak and his affection for a country school teacher Molly.

Like many of his previous films such as *Homelands* and *Billal*, Zubrycki has used a personal and intimate approach to tackle an issue that has been the domain of the tabloids and current affair programs.

'All my documentaries revolve around personal stories. I believe that it is the best way to move and effect an audience and give them awareness about the wider issues. It's through people identifying with a situation which has resonance in their own lives that they gain an insight into the wider context. Everyone can connect with a love story!'

Molly and Mobarak is set in the New South Wales township of Young which has a chequered past in regards to race relations. This was the place where in the 1860's angry miners chased the Chinese from the goldfields giving rise to colonial legislation which became known as the White Australia Policy.

The impetus for the story revolves around the local abattoir that employed ninety Hazaran Afghan refugees after finding

it difficult to fill job vacancies with locals. Mobarak is one of these men. He is in limbo with a temporary visa quickly running out. His future is unknown and he is missing his family. A group of volunteers organised by a local TAFE teacher band together and help the refugees with English lessons. It was here that Molly and Mobarak met and where Zubrycki found the characters that became his story.

'I was drawn to the intensity of the relationship between the volunteers and Hazaras. I instinctively knew that somewhere in there would lie my film.'

The refugee issue in Australia is a sensitive topic and yet it is one that tends to drift in and out of the collective consciousness when the media is not reporting it.

'I think that as a documentarian you have the responsibility to give people an understanding about an issue that is quite different and separate from an understanding that may be taken from the printed word, television and radio. It's a form that subverts other media to the extent that it can awaken people, it can sharpen their awareness, rouse their interest and maybe shock them to action'

This subversion comes from the personal approach Zubrycki takes with the film. From the start we hear Zubrycki's voice placing himself in the story and by his very presence with the camera we know that he has a relationship with these subjects that goes beyond merely recording of events.

'Often I was the sounding board to his (Mobarak's) particular emotional problems with Molly. He wanted to get feedback from an older guy. I became a confidant and I remain that – even now that the film's finished'

One of the challenges in the making of *Molly and Mobarak* was sticking a camera in during intense personal moments.

'One can easily become invisible with this kind of filmmaking. People become so used to you with the camera. However not entirely would I say that they weren't aware. You are there, the camera is around.'

Naturally you want to get as close as possible, but at certain time people tell you to stop and not to film, so the rules for filming evolve through your relationship with the subjects. They are the ones that set up the boundaries. Every film is different.'

One of the most powerful sequence in the film is where Lyn (Molly's mother) is telling Mobarak to back-off her daughter.

"You can see in the sequence where Lyn's giving me sideways glances – as if she's thinking 'should I allow him to film this or not? Is this too private and too personal'? I ended-up spending an hour filming a very fraught conversation. At the end I believe I crossed a certain threshold in terms of what was possible.'

Molly and Mobarak had several technical constraints. Zubrycki shot and sound recorded most of the film himself, except when he acquired the services of a cameraman to help him with a couple of complex set ups. Although the footage may have been better quality the subjects of the film became reticent with the introduction of a new member of the crew.

'The chemistry changed. I think they were missing that intimacy they had with just me being there. I had the feeling they didn't want anybody else privy to our secrets.'

Realising the dynamic had been upset Zubrycki went back to shooting himself. Armed with the Sony DVCAM PD150 with a Sanken directional microphone mounted on top he was able to pick up the camera and shoot at a moment's notice. He seldom used a radio mike instead adopting a method of 'editing in camera'

'I had the camera running for most of the time for certain sequences. I listened intently while I was shooting. People often repeat themselves, or say things that aren't relevant, giving me the chance to sneak cutaways.'

Although going solo enabled the personal contact with his subject to flourish it was challenging as a filmmaker not having other crewmembers around to bounce ideas off.

'I knew I always had Ray Thomas (editor) to come back to. We always do a bit of assembling early on in the piece, or we just look at rushes together. I tend to get bogged down by the sheer quantity of the material I've shot and I'm no longer sure if the story elements I think I've captured are actually there.'

Whilst Zubrycki was the driving force during production the editor of the film Ray Thomas became the much needed objective eye. The editing process was incorporated into the shooting phase enabling the structure and story threads to be found that could be followed up on later shooting days. It also enabled them to realise early on, which subjects to focus on and which narratives to explore further.

Zubrycki calls *Molly and Mobarak* a 'verite-narrative'. "

"The shooting is observational, the narration is personal and minimal and the film is structured like a scripted drama. The technique is to being 'open to moments that reveal', and some moments we had were extraordinary – ones that even a good script writer would never have dreamed-up.

Finding the right story and pursuing it can create another set of scruples. As filmmakers we all aspire to tell the best story but how will that effect the subjects' lives later on? As a documentary-maker you are dealing with people that have to live with the ramifications of their on-screen actions after the credits roll.

'This type of filmmaking is always an ethical minefield. There is no 'pure' ethical documentary. You just have to handle each issue as it comes up.'

Zubrycki hopes are that the film will contribute to a more informed debate and directly promote the interests of all

refugees trapped in limbo on these temporary visas. However there is no fail-safe guarantee that the film will directly help Mobarak's chances of staying in Australia. Could it perhaps do the opposite? Could it be used against him?

'This question gave me a lot of angst and it came to a head in the final stages of editing. We had immigration lawyers trooping in and out of the cutting room. Some scenes were dropped, others altered. Finally I had to make an informed decision which was on balance that the film would help his case. In fact on the first night of the Sydney Film Festival a local barrister offered his services 'pro bono' to represent Mobarak'.

Molly and Mobarak has screened at the Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane Film Festivals. Councils and local groups are organising screenings in Marrickville, Wollongong, Newcastle, the Blue Mountains, Byron Bay and other parts of rural New South Wales and Victoria. The film will have its international premiere at the Toronto Film Festival in September and Hopscotch Films is planning to release the film in cinemas later this year.