

# "MOLLY & MOBARAK" -

*PRODUCTION NOTES by Tom Zubrycki*

**Molly and Mobarak** continues a path I began in the 90's making observational documentary essays of Australian families at times of personal crisis or 'rite of passage' eg **Homelands** (1993) and **Billal** (1996)

The idea for this film had its origin in my research into what happened to refugees once they left the detention centres. I noticed that while most vanished into multicultural Australia, a significant number were settling into country towns - especially expanding rural centres like Young where there was a shortage of labour.

Young is a small town of 11,000 people 4 hours drive from Sydney. I discovered that 90 Afghans - all men - from the Hazara ethnic minority were working at the local abattoir. The men had all arrived in Australia by boat and had spent several months in detention before being assessed as genuine refugees. They had all been given 3-year Temporary Protection Visas (TPV's) which allowed them to live and work anywhere in Australia. However the TPV meant they couldn't sponsor their families here, and they were ineligible for a wide range of benefits, including access to English classes. Technically they were second class citizens.

What made Young interesting is that a small group in the community decided to make it their business to help these Hazara men. It all started around a series of picnics in local parks. Ann Bell, an enterprising TAFE teacher, organised a group of volunteers to teach the men English one night a week. The volunteers, mainly women, were drawn from a wide cross-section of the community: school-teachers, farming people, nurses, a catholic nun, and a manager of a local supermarket.

I made several research trips in early 2003 and I was drawn to the intensity of the *relationship* between the Afghans and the Australians. I started to film with several families who had 'adopted' Hazaras – one of them was 25 year-old high-school teacher Molly and her mother Lyn. Molly had met 23 year-old Abattoir worker Mobarak at one of the English classes. The first time I filmed with Molly and Mobarak was when she took him for his second driving lesson. I asked could I sit in the back seat with my camera. They agreed and that's how the year of filming began and how their relationship started.

As the weeks went by it quickly became apparent that this was more than just an innocent friendship. Mobarak had romantic intentions for Molly, which weren't necessarily reciprocated. I knew this would lead to complications down the track. I also knew, however, that this could provide the film's narrative structure as well as its emotional power. A universal story about unrequited love would give the film strong audience appeal. But what would make it so complex and poignant would be the underlying cultural differences and Mobarak's vested interest in remaining in Australia.

## **FILMING APPROACHES**

Before I was sure of the actual story or the key subjects I immediately knew that making this film would take many months and repeated visits to Young. Only after this time would the film find its eventual shape and viewpoint.

I decided to make the shooting observational. My technique, like with my other film was to being 'open to moments that reveal', and some moments we had were extraordinary – ones that even a good script writer would have dreamed-up.

I decided to film and record sound myself. This was in the interest of greater access and intimacy – something I quickly realised when one weekend I hired a cinematographer to help with a particularly

difficult set-up. Just having an additional person around altered in a subtle way the relationship between myself and Mobarak, Lyn and Molly. I vowed to continue on my own after that.

After filming with Molly and Mobarak over a number of weekends, Lyn invited me to stay in the house whenever I came down. There was a spare room 'out the back', and so this is where I moved in. It was especially handy because a lot of the filming ended-up being done in the kitchen. I used to keep the camera close by - in the corner of the lounge-room. It was in a handy place whenever I needed to film.

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 I wanted to get as close as possible, but at certain times Lyn and Molly told me to stop and not to film, so the rules for filming evolved through my relationship with them. They were the ones who set up the boundaries. Every film is different.

## **RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE CHARACTERS**

The film's narrative drive is bound-up in the relationship between Mobarak, Molly and Lyn. Getting the dynamic of the relationship right was quite subtle and tricky. I wanted the viewer to identify with Mobarak's desires for Molly but also to feel uncomfortable with his emotional neediness. We start to feel for Molly as she's being suffocated by Mobarak's cloying affections, then switch to Mobarak as we watch him being pushed-out the door by the two women and experience the pain and anguish of his separation.

Earlier in the film I'd established Mobarak as someone who awkwardly feels his way with an Australian family. His efforts at being understood in a second language make him appear very vulnerable. Mobarak's loss of country and family have left him feeling isolated, lonely and fearful. These feelings are compounded by the uncertainty of the Temporary Visa process and the racism in

the town. These experiences leave Mobarak forming strong attachments that may not be sustained. Mobarak's relationship with Lyn and Molly is underpinned by these unresolved needs. So when Mobarak feels Molly cutting off from him, her imminent loss re-awakens his feelings of isolation and loss that he experienced when he first arrived in Australia.

Molly feelings towards Mobarak are a mixture of compassion and genuine affection. She is genuinely attracted to him and enjoys his company. Her boyfriend lives in a far away corner of the State. She sees him only occasionally and he never comes to Young. The presence of the boyfriend is a useful ploy that Molly adopts to keep Mobarak at a distance. However when Mobarak declares his love for her she doesn't want to hurt his feelings by confronting him directly. The job of telling Mobarak the truth falls on Lyn's shoulders who uses the 'almost fictional' boyfriend also as a handy excuse.

Lyn increasingly feels caught in the middle between her daughter and Mobarak. She wants him to be part of the family but she can't really help him with her daughter. Being a 'bad cop' confuses her emotions. She becomes racked with guilt, made even more palpable when Mobarak suddenly leaves Young and makes a 1,000 kilometre journey to Adelaide to resolve his feelings about Molly and start afresh. Then Molly returns to Young, quickly Mobarak returns as well and the family is reunited – albeit briefly, before Mobarak makes another transformative decision.

Mobarak enjoys the closeness of Lyn and Molly's family and finds security and certainty in this bond, so once Mobarak makes a decision to separate himself from the family and confront the uncertainty of the visa process (and his whole future) one is aware that he has taken on something quite huge. Suddenly he becomes articulate when his very survival is at stake. Finding his voice in the scene with the lawyer and interpreter is symbolic of this moment of personal growth. The film observes Mobarak being a boy and then follows him growing-up and becoming a man. His decision to leave Young after Molly rejects him is the only way he can come to terms

with the loss of Molly. Its also part of his maturity that he takes risks in another city – finds a job, somewhere to live etc.

As a temporary visa holder Mobarak is in a perpetual state of limbo. Despite this pervading sense of uncertainty Mobarak wants to change, to assimilate, to throw off absolutely everything that represents the culture he came from, including the Islamic religion. His open change of identity and yearning to be Australian - to look the same and behave the same as other people – can be seen as an *act of resistance*. His need to change quickly and dramatically creates a distance within his own community. He is no longer interested in associating with other Afghans. He just wants to become ‘one of us’.