

# Article for IF Magazine October 2001

Tom Zubrycki

(intro text)

**Tom Zubrycki** argues that ,while reconstruction is not exactly *de rigueur*, it is still a very valid form of documentary.

(text)

*The British writer and academic Stella Bruzzi says that "documentaries are a negotiation between filmmaker and reality and, at heart, a performance."*

The notion of performance is not something I would have associated with documentary before *The Secret Safari*, but thinking about it, it makes perfect sense. Documentary, for me, has always involved something of a tension between spontaneity and a high level of construction. There is something artificial about the idea of performance, and what is more artificial than (1) a reconstruction, and (2) an interview situation? Both happen to lie at the core of the structure of my latest film.

The original idea for *The Secret Safari* belonged to a South African producer, David Max Brown. David was the son of Mannie Brown, a white former African National Congress (ANC) member, who had masterminded a plan to smuggle guns into the black townships of Capetown and Johannesburg, using a safari truck as cover. The weapons were packed in special boxes stored in secretly designed compartment under the passengers seats literally under their bums. The arms were destined for township struggle and a possible armed insurrection.

David had been trying to get the film made ever since Mandela's landslide victory over De Klerk in the first democratic elections in South Africa. In 1998 his co-producer took the film to Amsterdam and pitched it at the Forum, Europe's largest gathering of television commissioning editors and independent producers. The Forum is like the Holy Grail to doco makers. To pitch a project to this elite assembly virtually ensures it eventual production.

*The Secret Safari* was the last pitch of the first day. It wasn't even on the program. It was simply drawn out of a box. Call it a lucky dip, if you like! What happens is that every morning those producers whose projects are not on the official program throw their business cards into this box. At a special session late in the day, one card is drawn out. This particular day it happened to be this film. Fortunately, my colleague Sally Browning was there, heard the pitch, and immediately saw an Australian angle. I also happened to be at the Forum

pitching another project. The two of us got together and decided to make the film as a team same way as we made *The Diplomat*. Sally quickly organised the finance, starting from an SBS pre-sale, followed by ones to Finland and, naturally, South Africa, as well as a distribution guarantee from Alliance Atlantis.

A few months later I went across to Johannesburg to meet David and research the treatment. Through his father, David had virtually all the contacts - the drivers, the recruiters, and the women who had set up the fake travel company. Many of our potential characters lived in England, and David had already made rough video recordings with them, thus enabling me to see what they were like. He had also traced the original safari truck an old Bedford that had been rusting away in a wrecking yard alongside old army tanks and jeeps. We wanted to restore the truck in preparation for our reenactments.

I returned to Sydney and began writing the treatment, emailing David every few days with drafts. While I was busy writing he was busy digging - examining old paperwork for the names and addresses of the original passengers. Virtually everybody in the command structure of this highly secretive operation - recruiters, drivers, and couriers - were prepared to talk. For many it was a psychological release. Theyd kept it a secret for years and were impatient to speak, to let go! The only people who wouldnt cooperate were those who had been the last link in the chain - the black operatives who actually distributed the arms inside the townships! Many of them now had senior posts in Thabo Mbekis new government, and refused to be interviewed.

The experience of directing *The Secret Safari* was completely and utterly different to *The Diplomat*, or the films Id made previously, like *Billa!* and *Homelands*. These were done verite-style, following a story unfolding over a period of time, with all its twists and turns (two years in the case of *The Diplomat*). They involved being in the right place at the right time and trusting in ones own intuition. Verite is very much the art of second guessing the future - if you miss an event crucial to the unfolding narrative, it will almost certainly not occur again.

With this new film I had to radically alter my style of working. Rather than stalking a reluctant Jose Ramos-Horta, I was dealing with an incident that had already happened in the past - it was already history. Now I had to bring this history to life.

Reenactment seemed an obvious way to facilitate the telling of the story, and David and I exchanged many emails concerning the form the dramatisations would take. Our plan was to involve one of the original drivers who would take charge of the truck - and to find non-actors who would play the tourists. Just prior to the start of production we put up notices in backpacker lodges, offering a three-day return drive to the Zimbabwe border, including a tour of a game-park, with free beer thrown in. We had no shortage of takers - although we completely

miscalculated how much beer these young travellers would drink. What we supplied lasted a day!

My idea was to make the main characters in the film - the drivers and couriers - not only interviewees, but 'actors' in their own story. Not only would they recall key events from the past, but also reenact them. James, for instance, tells us about the personal costs involved in leading a double life for five years but he also goes out to do the arms pick ups, digs the holes, and buries the boxes. Similarly Martha packs the boxes of weapons into wardrobes in her flat, then later re-packs them into her car. Both of them give convincing 'performances'.

With a maximum speed of only 70ks per hour, the old Bedford truck was painfully slow in getting from one location to the next. The brakes were always losing power and frequently we'd be pulled-up by the side of the road with Stuart, one of the original drivers, under the engine. Fortunately he knew the Bedford intimately, but in the end our tight schedule left us comparatively little time to shoot a sequence. So forget storyboards, we had to make decisions spontaneously and quickly. Roman Baska, the cinematographer, and I would work out a sequence of shots and block out a series of moves. Roman would then light the scene while I supervised the performances. It was a verite-style approach to shooting drama.

I wanted to separate the look of the re-enactments as much as possible from the look of the interview footage. But I preferred to go the opposite way to Errol Morris in *The Thin Blue Line* - rather than glossy hyper-realism, choosing instead to muddy the reenactments - to defocus the realism. My editor, Emma Hay, and I tried out various effects in post-production. Eventually we arrived at a strobe effect which we applied to every shot, as well as replacing the original colour with a uniform brown cast.

The interviews in *The Secret Safari* were also done with a particular method in mind. I had one distinct advantage. Unlike David, I was meeting people fresh, thus they were revealing their legend their secret identity - for the first time *to me*. I had to draw the information out slowly, and for some, this became a painful process. The internal operatives had been exposed to incredible danger and had left a double life for so many years that they couldn't bring themselves to tell the truth even to their closest of kin. Martha Molete had told me earlier how she used to light incense in her flat because she used to hate the smell of guns. However when it came to the actual interview she reneged at the last minute. She had never told her parents in Canada that shed been an arms courier! For seven years theyd thought she was just a teacher. At the last minute she rang them to tell them. They were fine about it, and Martha gave us an interview the next day.

When it came to the passengers on the actual safari, the interview process became more like a performance, although admittedly the process involved a bit

of manipulation on my part. My decision was not to tell them the entire story ahead of time. They never actually knew theyd been sitting on guns until the actual interview. All they knew was that *something* was being smuggled. I didnt tell them precisely what. Many of them imagined it could have been drugs, so they came to the interview curious to find out. The amazed grimace on the face of Stuart Shaw, one of the English passengers, says it all.

On the last day the unbelievable happened. One of our non-actors, came forward and revealed he had worked for South African intelligence. The people in the covert operations unit he worked for had been trying unsuccessfully to uncover smuggling operations. We snared an interview, although he was only prepared to talk in silhouette. He did say that he was just coming along for the ride, but I never did get to bottom of all that!

Directing *The Secret Safari* and *The Diplomat* represent, for me, two quite different ways of working one in a highly controlled environment, the other the other in a very uncontrolled one. Each requires its own discipline, and each is as valid as the other. Currently, in the era of reality television, there seems to be a orthodoxy at work in documentary which shuns any form of reconstruction as a departure from the real. Reenactments are something many doco makers shy away from, but it need not be the case! I tend to agree with Errol Morris: "Truth isnt guaranteed by style and expression. It isnt guaranteed by anything."

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Tom Zubrycki is an Australian documentary filmmaker whose films have been locally and internationally acclaimed. He has produced many documentaries, including *Exile in Sarajevo* (1997, International Emmy), *Whiteys Like Us* (1999) and *Stolen Generations* (2000). His career as director spans twenty-five years, and includes films such as *Kemira-Diary of a Strike* (1984), *Homelands* (1993), and *The Diplomat* (2000).

*The Diplomat* was voted Best Documentary at both Melbourne and Sydney film festivals, and received two AFI awards including Best Documentary and Best Direction in a Documentary.

*The Secret Safari* won the prize for the Best Documentary in the Dendy Awards at this years Sydney Film Festival. It was made in association with SBS Independent and with the assistance of the Australian Film Finance Corporation.

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