

Tom Zubrycki: On filmmaking, history and other obsessions

Patrick Armstrong

Tom Zubrycki is one of Australia's finest documentary filmmakers. With his lucky **thirteenth** film, *Vietnam Symphony* (2005) soon be released, he reflects on his **twenty-five** years in the game.

'A passion for social justice has always been my main motivation,' says Tom Zubrycki. Over his four-decade career, Zubrycki has tackled contentious social and political issues in more than a dozen documentaries. 'But I'm also inspired to tell stories about ordinary Australians - stories that have been traditionally ignored by the mainstream media, and that need to be told.'¹T'

Credited with thirteen films as a writer/director and six as a producer, Zubrycki has examined some loaded themes: the **plight** of refugees and the working class, the power of trade unions in industrial relations disputes, and hate crimes driven by racism.

As the son of Polish migrants, Zubrycki acknowledges that his work has been influenced by an innate empathy with outsiders. He is interested in the impact of the 'big picture' on the individual, and a highly personalised and emotive approach is what sets him apart as a documentary-maker. His unique style borrows the dramatic storytelling techniques from the conventions of fiction.

For me documentary, like any work of art, needs to reach something universal and speak about the human condition ... and it has to start from the inside. It's only when you engage at a really a deep level with your subjects and with the story that you get those key revelatory moments. In the end the film says as much about yourself as it does about them - it bears your imprint. I believe subjectivity is intrinsic to good documentary. There's no reason why doco can't be as personal as fiction filmmaking.²

Zubrycki has an inherent ability to establish extraordinary trust **with** his subjects. **Audiences gradually get** to 'know' the characters in his films, **through bearing** witness to many of their unguarded moments.

This strategy was never more effective than in his most recent film *Molly & Mobarak* (Tom Zubrycki, 2003). **Acclaimed** when **it** premiered at the 2003 Sydney Film Festival, the documentary went on to achieve wide international exposure, before being released at independent cinemas and broadcast on SBS.

Set in the NSW rural town of Young, the film is a story of unrequited love between an Australian girl (Molly) and an Afghani refugee (Mobarak) who is in Australia on a 3-year Temporary Protection Visa. The film humanizes the people that the **current federal Liberal** government **have** denounced as 'queue-jumpers'. Zubrycki paints a different picture; one of displaced, hardworking and community-minded people who are simply seeking a better life than that offered in their homeland. However, making an honest observational film can be a tricky and enervating process.

The film's narrative is bound-up in the complex relationship between Mobarak, Molly and Lyn (Molly's Mum). Getting the dynamic of the relationship right in the edit was quite subtle. A lot happens in the film – people change enormously, especially Mobarak. There are many strong and intimate emotional moments. To be able to make this sort of film you have to win the subject's trust, and this trust has to be earned. It's not a 'given', but a gradual thing. You have to convince them that you're not there to judge, and to assure them they have the power of veto over the final cut³

Zubrycki's career began in Canberra in the early 1970s with a degree in Science, but the raging social activism of the times soon shifted his interests towards studying Sociology at the University of New South Wales. People he met there exposed him to theoretical ideas about localized media as a tool of social change, which then led him to join the emerging community video movement.

This grassroots approach to social and political issues kept Zubrycki largely within Australia while many of his contemporaries, such as Bob Connolly, Dennis O'Rourke and David Bradbury, turned their lenses towards the **broader Asia Pacific region**.

While Bob and Dennis were making films in New Guinea, I started in my backyard. I shot on the first video cameras that became available – lumpy and heavy. It was primitive technology but it allowed me to produce, shoot and edit short black and white 'agit-prop' videos about issues in my immediate neighbourhood, such as freeway expansion slicing apart communities. They screened in community halls and were used as part of local campaigns by Resident Action Groups.

In 1978, frustrated with the technical limitations of early video and wanting to reach a wider audience, Zubrycki turned to film. The inspiration came when he attended a small ethnographic film conference in Canberra. Here, he was first exposed to the documentaries of Frederick Wiseman, the Maysles Brothers and Richard Leacock. These now classic films and their 'direct cinema' style had a profound influence on his subsequent work.

Waterloo (Tom Zubrycki, 1982), **shot on 16mm**, was the first of four documentaries addressing community and class politics, a venture that eventually led to disillusionment. In *Waterloo*, Zubrycki sets-out to explore the community outrage in the inner Sydney suburb of the title, as residents attempt to fend off bulldozers intent on demolishing their streets. The Housing Commission wanted to make room for the 'progress' of high-rise living and residents were told they had to move. However Zubrycki **encountered** an unexpected problem:

I had conceived the film as a 'blow-by-blow' account anticipating that the shooting would take place over a **twelve month** period. I was wrong. The issue was actually resolved very rapidly - in the first few weeks of filming. What could I do? I had to find another angle or another story. It was a situation I had to confront time and time again in subsequent documentaries. It soon became obvious that the back-story had to become the film! The struggle to save a few blocks of houses in Waterloo became a larger story of this working class suburb and its history⁴.

With Zubrycki's commitment to community politics came a growing interest in the Trade Union movement. *Kemira - Diary of a Strike* (1984), goes to the front line of **striking coal miners** in the NSW industrial city of Wollongong. The workers were forced to take involuntary redundancies by their employer BHP, an action that threatened to not only tear apart their lives, but also destroy the very livelihood of **the** region.

While shooting *Kemira*, it soon became obvious that the strike was going to be an important one historically and would have repercussions. We saw that something explosive was brewing so we followed their journey to Canberra where the miners stormed Parliament House. I knew then I had one of the film's key scenes and it started to convince me that some of the best films arise when you tackle something that's unfolding. Shooting first and getting the funding later can be a calculated gamble, but it's the only way certain films can be made.⁵

Having now embarked on two stories about **individuals** protected by the Union movement, Zubrycki turned his camera on the **Union** leaders, a move that would severely challenge his faith in the mechanics of **Union politics**.

Friends & Enemies (Tom Zubrycki, 1987) and *Amongst Equals* (Tom Zubrycki, 1988) **are arguably the director's** most controversial works. The two films sparked derision and anger from those he set out to fairly represent.

Friends & Enemies **details** a ferocious labour dispute – the 1985 strike by electrical workers triggered by the decision by the South East Queensland Electricity Board (SEQEB) to hire contractors. The then Queensland Premier, Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen, reacted by sacking over 1000 workers and rushed through some of the harshest anti-union legislation ever seen in Australia.

There were no heroes in *Friends & Enemies*. Zubrycki constructed them all as ambivalent characters: Vince Lester was a clownish minister of state in the National Party government, Bernie Neville a bullish leader of the Strike Committee, Ray Dempsey a weak and squeamish leader of the Labor Council, and Simon Crean a compromised agent of **The Australian Council of Trade Unions** (ACTU). Only the wives and mothers of the strikers emerge with any integrity.

When *Friends and Enemies* was shown there was a near riot in the cinema. Even before the film was shown the main character, Bernie Neville, rushed up on the stage and berated me, saying the film was inaccurate. That was the climate – even though the strike had been over for six months, things were running hot. Debate continued for three hours after the film. I was quite shattered by the experience at the time, but looking back at it, I think it's probably the best thing that could have happened.⁶

But nothing could have quite prepared Zubrycki for the furore surrounding *Amongst Equals*.

In 1986, Zubrycki gained support from Film Australia to make a history of the Australian labour movement. Together they approached the Australian Bi-Centennial Authority for funding. The **Authority** offered \$200,000 and requested they find an

additional suitable sponsor to commit the remaining funds. The ACTU was the obvious choice and they gave their financial support for the project in 1987, effectively making them the sponsors – a grave mistake.

With Zubrycki contracted to write and direct the piece, all parties agreed that the series would be a ‘critical history’ with a prime time television audience in mind.

The film was completed by the middle of 1988. The ACTU, in spite of approving the original script, didn’t like what they saw. Several re-cuts of the film were made, all rejected by the ACTU who had the final say. After a year of stalemate, Zubrycki decided to release and then distribute the film illegally.

The ACTU thought the series too ‘workerist’. I took the angle of looking at workers themselves, their experiences, their work and their individual activity, not simply looking at the institutions that represent them. The ACTU just wanted a propaganda film.⁷

Amongst Equals closed **the** first chapter in Zubrycki’s career and prompted him to consider new thematic concerns and different approaches to his storytelling.

He made two films in quick succession in Broome, Western Australia - *Lord of the Bush* (1990) and *Bran Nue Dae*, (1991). *Lord of the Bush* was a character piece about the ex-treasurer of the British Tory Party, Lord Alistair McAlpine, and his ambivalent and somewhat patronizing relationship towards the Aboriginal community. *Bran Nue Dae* looks at the life of Jimmy Chi and his fascinating journey to create the world’s first Aboriginal Musical. However it was Zubrycki’s next film, *Homelands* (Tom Zubrycki, 1993) that took him to new ground, marking a dramatic breakthrough with his style of filmmaking.

Homelands explores the **relationship between Maria and Carlos, a married couple who fled El Salvador and settled in suburban Melbourne**. Maria has adjusted to Australian life, with a good job and four happy daughters. Carlos has not **adjusted as successfully**. Formerly a teacher, he now can only find work as a cleaner. When the war in El Salvador ends, they must choose between their new life and the old. Carlos chooses to return to El Salvador to help rebuild the country, while Maria and the girls stay **in Melbourne**. Six months pass and Maria decides to go back to see Carlos. Zubrycki goes with her.

It’s a stirring and complex portrait of a family, marking Zubrycki’s leap into the more personalized **style of filmmaking that has characterized his recent films**. Zubrycki was invited into the family for more than a year, a long stretch that led to inevitable tensions. Complex relationships began to emerge, especially between Zubrycki and the vulnerable Maria, who starts using the camera to vent suspicions of her husband’s infidelity. More poignantly, she speaks of being raped during the war by a group of soldiers. Maria had never spoken of this to anyone before.

For me the roles of filmmaker, friend, and counselor overlapped and merged, and as the filming continued Maria, Carlos and I became involved in a complex three-way relationship. It all came to a head when Maria decided to fly to El Salvador to track down her husband. Carlos became jealous of me thinking I’d become Maria’s new lover.⁸

Zubrycki acknowledges the distinct shift in his storytelling method that began with *Homelands*. The film marks the first time he allowed his story to develop organically, building his narrative around predictions of what he **thought might** happen to the characters. He has used this same technique in most of his subsequent work, creating subtle and humanist documentaries that **also resulted in** brave and perceptive filmmaking.

Over the course of making *Homelands*, I evolved an approach and working method for what I now call ‘observational narratives’. You start with an idea. You research it through some initial filming until you eventually find the characters and the story and predict a possible dramatic arc. Filming continues over a period of several months predicated by story and character development. You ‘re-invent’ the film day after day. It becomes a magical process fed by the unconscious – a product of the relationship between the person shooting and the person shot. In the editing you recover the magic that you experienced in the shooting. The final film illuminates your original idea, but in a way you would never have predicted.⁹

This new style was adapted to his next two films *Billal* (1996) and *The Diplomat*, (2000), and subsequently in *Molly & Mobarak*.

Billal is the story of the **Lebanese Eter family, who live on an Anglo-Australian dominated housing estate in Sydney’s western suburbs**. When a fight breaks out between the Eter’s teenage sons and the neighbours next door, racial insults are exchanged. All go to bed and sleep it off. **The next day, 16-year old Billal Eter is hit by a car** that deliberately accelerates as he comes into view. Billal sustained devastating brain injuries and the film is a harrowing portrait of his and the family’s long journey to recovery, with his mother playing a key role.

For Zubrycki, *Billal* and *Homelands* stand as his most accomplished films.

I think overall that *Homelands* and *Billal* are my most personally satisfying films artistically. In both films I had fantastic access and got really close to the characters. I also had several parallel storylines and achieved an interpretive rather than literal narration. They both have great emotional force, especially *Billal*.¹⁰

With his next project, Zubrycki continued to push his boundaries as a filmmaker. *The Diplomat* was his first foray into international politics. **The film follows** Nobel Peace Prize-winning freedom fighter José Ramos Horta in the final tumultuous year of the campaign to secure independence for East Timor. Horta had been exiled from his country after the 1975 Indonesian invasion. For **twenty four** years he traded the gun of a revolutionary for the suit a diplomat, roaming the world to spread the message about his nations’ troubles. As luck would have it, Zubrycki was already making a documentary on Horta when the struggle for East Timorese freedom was about to become a reality.

Originally the time scale for the project was **twelve** months. The film was **intended** to be a personal ‘fly on the wall’ profile of Horta’s erratic and lonely life as a diplomat pushing an issue that the world had once again **lost interest in**. This quickly changed,

and the film became a story about the birth of a nation with Horta as the key protagonist.¹¹ Again, Zubrycki allowed the action to dictate the direction of the film, adapting his story to events as they unfolded. However in this case, he was faced with some considerable challenges.

One of the problems I had as a director was deciding when to film, given that events were changing not by the week, but by the day. Horta himself was a difficult man to get to know, very unpredictable, but our relationship grew slowly over time. He is very media savvy and good at hiding his true feelings, giving you only what he thinks you need to know at any given time. In the end, I realized that it was best to just select significant events – potential turning points in the narrative - and then simply observe him at work. The ironies and contradictions of his working style quickly became apparent.¹²

Before his highly successful *Molly & Mobarak* came another work with an international focus, *The Secret Safari* (2001). The film shows a lighter, more relaxed filmmaker. Zubrycki re-tells the true story of a backpacker bus in apartheid era South Africa, used by the African National Congress (ANC) to smuggle guns to freedom fighters, unbeknownst to the hapless paid passengers onboard. The original working title was ‘Guns Under Their Bums’.

Zubrycki’s new focus beyond Australia has taken him to Vietnam for his **forthcoming film**. Just completed, *Vietnam Symphony* centres on the plight of the National Conservatoire of Music in Hanoi throughout the duration of the American War. Amidst the conflict, the Conservatoire struggled on, operating out of a small village within an evacuation zone. Most of the young graduates **ended** up at the front line.

The historical story of the Conservatoire is told through a large ‘cast’, blending archive, interview and music. Running parallel **to this broad historical context** is the personal story of a cellist and his son, also a musician. The son goes against his father’s wishes, turning his back on a concert career to work as a quiz show host on television - an interesting metaphor **for modern** Vietnam and the rapid social changes sweeping the country.

It was a challenging film to make, especially getting the contemporary story to blend into the historical one. However the film is rich in music – from traditional to western classical, to jazz and pop. This was the key to solving the problem. Music is the film’s unifying element and an expressive one as well.¹³

Vietnam Symphony will be released on the film festival circuit before screening on SBS later **this** year. An independent cinema release is not out of the question. **In the past, this would have been an unlikely event, but is now a very real possibility given the increased audience demand for non-fiction films over recent years.** Zubrycki is buoyed by this public appreciation for documentaries and sees two distinct new trends emerging.

The documentaries that have been successful theatrically use complex storytelling skills with the same attention to detail as fiction. They also don’t flinch from making a direct appeal to the emotions. However, exciting new

work is coming outside traditional documentary centres. There is, for example, a comparatively unknown documentary movement in Russia. These films are slow paced narratives rich in symbolism – films such as *In the Dark* (Sergey Dvortsevoy, 2004). Chinese documentary makers have also just discovered DV, giving rise to extraordinary works like the **nine** hour *West of the Tracks* (Wang Bing, 2003) – already heralded a ‘classic’.¹⁴

As with all art forms, Tom Zubrycki believes documentaries should have a sense of timelessness. He cites Czech author Milan Kundera: “The struggle of people against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting”¹⁵. Zubrycki hopes that his films will increase the social and political consciousness of Australians, while leaving a testament of our times for future generations. ‘History is one of my obsessions’, he says, ‘and I’d like to make my own contribution’¹⁶.

Error! Bookmark not defined. **is a Sydney-based journalist.**

¹ Interview by author with Tom Zubrycki October 2004

² Interview by author with Tom Zubrycki November 2004.

³ Interview by author with Tom Zubrycki February 2005.

⁴ **Tom Zubrycki, ‘Documentary: A personal view’ in *Second Take: Australian Filmmakers Talk*, Raffaele Caputo & Geoff Burton (Eds), Allen & Unwin, St. Leonards, 1999; p180.**

⁵ Interview by author with Tom Zubrycki October 2004.

⁶ Taken from the original Directors Notes accompanying the 1987 release of *Friends & Enemies*.

⁷ Taken from a media statement released by Zubrycki during the 1989 in regards to his experience with the ACTU with *Among Equals*.

⁸ Interview by author with Tom Zubrycki October 2004

⁹ Interview by author with Tom Zubrycki November 2004.

¹⁰ Interview by author with Tom Zubrycki October 2004.

¹¹ Taken from the Production Notes accompanying the 2000 release of *The Diplomat*. The quote is used with the permission of Zubrycki

¹² Interview by author with Tom Zubrycki February 2005

¹³ Interview by author with Tom Zubrycki January 2005

¹⁴ Interview by author with Zubrycki February 2005

¹⁵ Milan Kundera; *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*; **Full publishing details here**1978

¹⁶ Interview by author with Tom Zubrycki October 2004

Filmography: Tom Zubrycki

Documentaries as Director

Waterloo (1981, 48 min). Best Documentary, Sydney Film Festival Dendy Awards. Cinema release.

Kemira - Diary of a Strike (1984, 62 mins). AFI award - Best Documentary, Best Documentary - Sheffield, Silver Bear - Leipzig. Cinema release.

Friends and Enemies (1987, 90 mins). AFI nomination Best Documentary. Sydney, Melbourne, London & Rotterdam Film Festivals. Cinema release.

Strangers in Paradise (1989, 55 mins Co-director, Gil Scrine)

Amongst Equals (1990, 90 mins). Cinema release. Melbourne Film Festival

Lord of the Bush (1990, 55 mins). AFI nomination Best Documentary.

Bran Nue Dae (1991, 55 mins)

Homelands (1993, 79 mins). Australian Film Critics Circle prize - Best Documentary, AFI nomination Best Documentary. Sydney, Melbourne, Cinema de Reel festivals. Cinema release.

Billal (1996, 86 mins). AFI nomination Best Documentary. Australian Film Critics Circle nomination. Sydney, Melbourne & Amsterdam Film Festivals. . Cinema release.

The Diplomat (2000, 84 mins) AFI awards - Best Documentary and Best Direction, First Prize Hawaii Film Festival, One World Festival – Prague. Best Documentary (Audience vote) - Sydney and Melbourne Film Festivals. Cinema release.

The Secret Safari (2001, 52 mins). Best Documentary prize, Dendy Awards – Sydney Film Festival.

Molly & Mobarak (2003, 84 mins). Australian Film Critics Circle Nomination – Best Documentary, If Awards Nomination. Sydney, Melbourne, Toronto & Amsterdam Film Festivals. Cinema release.

Vietnam Symphony (2005, 52 mins)

Documentaries as Producer

Exile in Sarajevo (1996, 90 mins. International Emmy)

Whiteys Like Us (1998. 52 mins)

Dr Jazz (1998, 55 mins)

Stolen Generations (2000, 52 mins). AFI nomination Best Documentary)

Gulpilil - One Red Blood (2002, 56 mins).

Making Venus (2002, 75 mins). Australian Film Critics Circle Jury Prize

Published Articles

Tom Zubrycki; **'Ahead of history' - the documentary filmmaker in the age of extremes'** The 2000 NSW Premier's History Awards Address.

Tom Zubrycki; **'Documentary: A personal view'** in Second Take edited by Raffaele Caputo & Geoff Burton. Allen & Unwin (publishers) 1999

Tom Zubrycki; **'From Video to Film and Back Again'** in METRO Magazine No 107

Career Awards

Tom Zubrycki is one of 21 directors to be given **an inaugural A.S.D.A accreditation** in recognition of the body of work as a director. The award was given by the Australian Screen Directors Association of Australia.