**Kemira – Diary Of A Strike.**

**My director’s notes.**

*Waterloo* was a calling card to *Kemira – Diary of a Strike*. I was working at Film Australia as an archive researcher on a 6-part series – *The Migrant Experience* – and I was employed on the basis that I could possibly direct one of the films in the series, but that never happened. So I thought, well damn it, I’ve saved up a bit of money, you know it’s been a year and a half doing this work. So I wanted badly to make my next film.

During my last days at Film Australia I noticed a story on page 3 in the Sydney Morning Herald. I read about this colliery just north of Wollongong where 31 miners just got retrenchment notices, unannounced, out of the blue. However they just refused to passively accept their final pay-check. In the fine tradition of the militant working class union they belonged to, they took direct action and started a sit-in strike, several kilometres underground. They literally locked themselves in, and the action caught their employer BHP completely by surprise. What do you do in the situation where your workforce decides not to come back up out of the pit?

It was pretty clear that the Sit-In had been planned for some weeks, the union had been tipped off about the retrenchment notices, and had been making preparations. This wasn’t a strike that was going to be resolved overnight. Far from it.

Wollongong was some distance from Sydney’s inner city, but I had a number of friends there at the time. The place really interested me. The town’s whole economy of the town was dependent on the steelworks and the mines that supplied coal to it. We were also living a time when Australian manufacturing was being transformed, meaning a lot of people were being retrenched. BHP was downsizing and unemployment was going through the roof. It was only a matter of time that some of the collieries themselves had to be close, or certainly reduced in size.

Very quickly the Wollongong community came in support of the miners. There was a Women’s Auxiliary that swung into action organising meals which were cooked and then sent down to the miners underground. The Union officials were counselling the wives and partners of the miners underground. Many of were spending daylight hours keeping vigil at the pit top.

I thought - damn it - I’m going down just to see what’s going on, there has to be a film made about this very dramatic moment – not only for the miners, but for the whole city of Wollongong. I had it in my mind that this film would follow the outcome of this Sit-In, whatever that might be, and however long it may last. I knew that the workers jobs were up in two weeks, I knew the Sit-In wouldn’t last forever, but it was high stakes. So I went down there for that day just to check it out, and I met a retired union official Fred Moore who seemed to be alert to everything that was going on. I introduced myself and he said, “Oh, who are you?” and I said, “Well, I actually know some people that you might know, and I’ve made a film called *Waterloo*, about such and such.” He said, “Oh, you made that film, did you? I’ve seen it. Oh, I think there’ll be no problem you coming up here and filming all this, I think that would be good. I’ll just talk to a few other officials about it.”

I got access to film - suddenly, just like that. The thing about miners that you have remember is they have a great sense of history, and to have somebody actually recording this event was a really big deal. Fred had been through the big lockouts in the ’40s, which almost led to the downfall of the Chifley Government.

So that’s how the film started. I got Fred’s blessing, and I thought - well how am I going to actually do this? I contacted two colleagues of mine, one who had shot the film *Ningla A-Na*, Fabio Cavadini. I thought he’d probably be up to it, because I used him on *Waterloo* a few times, plus a sound recordist, Russ Hermann who’d I’d worked with on earlier videos. I asked them: are you prepared to work on this for deferred wages, there may or may not be a film. Without hesitation they agreed.

So that left film stock, and where was I going to get that? I knew that filmmakers who had recently made films on reasonable budgets, actually might have still kept ‘short ends’ in their fridge. (Parts of 400 foot rolls that hadn’t been exposed through the camera). They may have been slightly dated, but they were still useable – give or take a bit of colour shift that could always be corrected in the grade. So I knocked on a few producers doors, and very quickly assembled about 25 rolls of stock, all 400 foot rolls, which totalled about 4 hours of shooting stock. I thought, if I actually rationed the stock, shot about two to three rolls per day, that would probably be enough to keep me going for a couple of weeks. The most important cash expenditure was to get the stock processed. I could always get it printed later if I was able to secure a grant. I had $3,000 at the time that I’d saved up in my job at Film Australia, so that would pay for the processing.

The strike was in its fifth day when we started filming. On the 6th day we were told that the unions had rented a train to take steelworkers and miners to Canberra to take their protest right up to Parliament House. So we hopped on and filmed the journey including doing some select interviews along the way. After the group of 400 or so alighted from the train I could sense that something big was going to happen. A conventional rally with speakers wasn’t what they had in mind. I sensed their anger mounting, as they strode up the hill later that morning to Old Parliament House. The camera was running the whole time. Then suddenly, the crowd of workers, partners and supporters charged towards the building. 10 minutes later they burst through the Parliament heavy plate glass doors. I thought to myself, well there’s got to be a film here, the film has to be made, and I’m going to convince the funding bodies that this is going to be worthwhile, because this is an event that’s far more than just a simple strike in a mine, it’s now reached the headlines, and is now of national significance, and this little story we’re making highlights the plight that the whole country finds itself in, with skyrocketing unemployment, and people unable to find themselves a job.

We were back up the following day at pit top filming all the people we’d got to know. At that stage I’d identified my main character, Ngaire. Why did I pick Ngaire to focus on? I don’t know quite why. Maybe because she was a bit removed from the other group of women. She was young, looked particularly vulnerable, with two young kids, and husband on strike down the pit.

Ngaire gave us an interview on the very first day actually when filming, but we followed up and did more interviews with her during the course of the strike, and of course afterwards as well. The strike ended in very dramatic fashion, the men came up, there were cheers, there were candles that lit the, you know the entrance to the mine, there were speeches made, but I knew, and others knew, that in fact this was just a pyrrhic victory, that in fact they had to get use to the fact that their jobs were still going to disappear, and they’d only won a small reprieve.

The strike was over, but I knew that I had to keep shooting. I still had some of that $3,000 I’d saved up working at Film Australia, so I bought fresh film stock and continued to film the weeks and months later.

There was a lot of bitterness – not only with the company, but with the Coal Tribunal. All the Tribunal did was order the company to give the strikers 2 weeks of additional pay and better severance conditions. The Tribunal couldn’t actually ORDER the company to reinstate the workers. This is what the 31 men wanted, but of course it was never going to happen. It turned quite bitter as the men, knowing this, kept on turning up to the pit top and asking for their jobs back, hoping the company would reinstate them. Despite having a weight of public opinion on their side, they eventually realised that this was just not going to happen.

I followed the aftermath of the strike all the way through to the end, in the large part through my central characters Ngaire and Will, her husband. I wanted to know what their plans were. Would things stay the same? And of course they didn’t. Six months after the strike, Ngaire and her partner, Will, split up, and they went their separate ways. He went up to Queensland looking for jobs in the mines there, while Ngaire remained at home with the kids. This was our last bit of filming. From the time the we started to the time we finished filming it was 6 months.

Of course there were other elements to the story as well, that I felt needed to convey – and this was to do with the political atmosphere of the times. The strike energised a lot of people in Wollongong to take their protest to Sydney,

Looking back now at the film it’s a piece of important social history. It evokes a of slice of working-class life that has now almost disappeared. The film is very much of its time. You know, people don’t speak about the class struggle anymore, and unions would seldom take such militant action to achive something that they badly wanted.

What happened to the film, well it went on to win the AFI for Best Documentary, and had film festival screenings, everywhere here in this country and overseas, It screened in Berlin, won a Silver Bear at Leipzig (Film Festival), and the main prize at Tyneside in the UK. So it was very well received, and people overseas could connect with what was going on within their own communities there as well. The striking miners from Durham attended the screening at Tyneside, which was right in the middle of the British Miners Strike.

Actually when the film was premiered in the State Theatre at the Sydney Film Festival in 1984, there was another strike going on at another colliery just down the road from Kemira, and the miners from that pit, and some of the supporters, came up and were received very generously by the festival audience. They said, “Well, it’s our jobs now, and this situation hasn’t changed.”

Thinking back, one of the films that inspired me was Barbara Kopple’s *Harlan County USA.*  I’d seen *Harlan County* at the Filmmakers Co-op a few years earlier. *Harlan County* and *Kemira* take you to a level beyond the local, and beyond the specific.

I think one of the things that Kemira illustrated what happens when people are confronted with something quite exceptional which throws their whole life into relief. They discover an passion often that they didn’t think they had, and they discover things about themselves that you know they wouldn’t have known. So life altering situations like that can really catalyse, energise an individual to suddenly make decisions that they wouldn’t normally make. ‘

The strike also energised people at the community level. I’m not exaggerating when I said the whole town came together in support of the guys underground,

When I started shooting, I knew I wanted to tell the story through a particular protagonist, even back before I shot a foot of film. I was wanting to mainly but not exclusively personalise it through one person, or one family ideally .

Edgar Morin, who worked with Jean Rouch back on *Chronicle of a Summer*, talked about the camera acting as a confessional, that people would say things in the presence of the camera that they would never say otherwise. It’s the filmmaker with the camera actually who has that transformative effect.

With Ngaire my presence might have had similar catalytic effect. I was interested how she would somehow survive these few weeks – the coping strategies she would have to adopt. We only had the film stock to do one main interview with Ngaire, but that was enough to find out how she felt about life in general, about her children and what they meant to her, about her partner being down the pit, about how she wwas being intimidated by the company for speaking out (“people from the mine coming and leaving little signs that they’d been round”). Unusual traffic in her street- cars cruising up and down. The strike was causing a big PR problem for BHP. They would have liked to have had the Sit-In finish and wrap up in a couple of days. It was not beyond belief therefore that they would apply pressure to whoever was most vulnerable.

Ngaire realised that she was being put under pressure, so I was her confidant. She felt that she could get things off her chest with me. By the second time I met and filmed with her it was as if I was now a good friend. I knew what she was giving me was something terribly emotional and heartfelt. I became conscious of it as the days turned into weeks, because she sought us out, rather than us seeking her out. The last day of the sit-in strike we went with her to the pit top. She was confiding to us constantly during the day, and by the evening, when we interviewed her just before her partner came up, she was in tears (“we’re winning, we’re winning, we’re winning”). Of course I knew that this was not true, and that she was just believing in hope.

As the months wore on Ngaire was able to step back and see her life with her partner wasn’t probably the best it could have been. After the Sit-In it became particularly tense, and she realised she was able to manage OK on her own, and that she could have another life. There is a very symbolic image in the film of her actually standing trying to break a piece of wood to light a fire. They had one of those old coppers in the backyard, and she was jumping on this piece of timber to break it. She broke it, and put the broken bits in the fire. it symbolised the control she was starting to have over her life, and how she was determined to turn a corner, and make a decision that would change her life forever, in other words separate from her partner.

The Women’s Auxiliary was headed by a defiant communist Sally Bowen. She basically ran the kitchen and organised the cooking of the meals, consoled the women - the mothers and wives, partners at pit top. As each day wore on groups of people gathered at the pit top, friends, mates, other workers, of the ones who were underground, and over... often they’d be preparing a meal, or lighting a little fire. It was October, a bit chilly during the day, and they would happily talk to us on camera. I asked them about how they thought about the company, and about what it was going to be like for them in years... in months to come. They gave me back a political analysis of what was happening to them and why.

I had no idea quite how all this would fit together, but I knew that this material would complement Ngaire, who was telling me all this really personal stuff. O was also was very conscious though of recording as much radio as possible, and that really was useful …, bits of radio bulletins which I used in place of narration. .

And the other element I wove into the film was the transcripts from the Coal Tribunal, where the company was arguing with the Mining Union about the impending retrenchments. I chose not to go to the company to get an interview, their attitude was quite well expressed in the Coal Tribunal, and the arguments the Unions were having with the Company.

It wasn’t a cut and dry thing either. There were understandable reasons why they closed the pits: the sudden downturn in the manufacturing sector, the more efficient longwall system of coal extraction. All those ideas were expressed in the Tribunal transcripts, so what I decided to do was paraphrase those transcripts and have actors read them out, with typewriter text unfurling on the screen roughly in sync with the voice. This animation had to be done optically in the lab, bloody difficult, and quite expensive as well.

During the 20 week edit it became very obvious to me that I had to situate what was happening in Kemira within a larger historical context, and I also wanted to get across the fact that mining was a dangerous thing to do. The militancy of the miners grew out of the conditions they had to work under, A good friend of mine, Brett Levy, who was Jock Levy’s son, brought to my attention the films of the Waterside Workers’ Film Unit films. I looked at all those films, and particularly one film called *Hewers of Coal*, and I decided to extract shots from this film and sat it at the front of my film. The opening sequnce then became this long wordless montage underpinned by a really great music track from Elizabeth Drake. Images and music played for perhaps 2½ minute, ending with an underground explosion that cut in the next frame to an aerial of the pit-top that I managed to extract from one of the TV stations – at a price of course. This was 30 years before drones would have made this simple and easy.

In the later stages of the edit I decided to do a reconstruction using the actual miners from the Sit-In. We organised a group to enter the mine at the dead of night, you know grabbing their torch lamps and kit bags stuff and going right down in the mining cars a fair way underground. The reconstruction lasted barely more than a minute, but it was enough to kind of convey a sense of what it was like. Incidentally, during the actual 2 week period of the strike, my cameraman, Fabio Cavadini, smuggled a small camera – a Bolex – underground. He gave the camera with instructions to one of the strikers, who turned out had a bit of experience shooting super 8 home movies. It’s a grainy, spooky and very emotional scene.

On the anniversary of the sit-on in 1983, I organised a double head projector screening of the rough cut. These projectors were pretty rare, but they ran film via one head, and magnetic film via the other. The Miners Federation had a hall, where the showing took place, and the screening was organised by that same Fred Moore, who had originally allowed permission for me to start making the film,

I didn’t see Ngaire there. She’s moved away from the area, as many of the 31 strikers did. Will wasn’t there either. Later I found out that he’d remarried by that stage, and he had his own family, and Ngaire had herself remarried. I got a call about four or five months ago from Ngaire’s son, who was then about six and now is in his early 30s, who had never seen the film. I sent Ngaire a VHS which must have someway been in... you know, ended up being unusable or lost, and he had tracked me down, googled my name and got onto me and said, “I would love to see the film that I’m in.” It was very touching and very moving. We maintained a good friendship. But like all these friendships born of film, they tend to be slightly artificial, and they don’t last forever. And... but, you know, I... you keep in touch as much as you can.

**Tom Zubrycki 2020**