

SECRET SAFARI

— Director's Notes

~~Use performance notion~~.....

Before I started this film I had not idea that there were whites in the ANC (African National Congress), or that gun smuggling was taking place using innocent tourists in a safar truck under the noses of the notorious South African police. The idea seemed so far fetched that it had to make it a compelling film.

The idea was not ours – it was a South African's Producer David Max Brown's. David was the son of Mannie Brown who had masterminded a plan to smuggle guns in to the black townships in major cities to enable the people to prepare for an armed insurrection.

The whole success of the scheme relied on a legitimate cover. A travel company was set-up in London selling the safaris to Aussie and Kiwi back-packers. Slide nights would take place pubs in Earls Court by people who knew not a thing about South Africa or the travel industry. Meanwhile, at the same time, a Bedford truck was purchased, and then modified with secret compartments located under the passengers seats to jold up to at on of small arms, machine guns, limpet mines and explosives. The truck was shipped to Nairobi picked-up the first lot of tourists and made its long was to Capetown. Despite some very near misses 40 trips were made across the border carrying a ton of arms each time for 6 years between 1987 and 1993

Msnnie kept the story absolutely quiet fro many years. He waited to tell his son David until after first democratic elections in South Africa which saw Mandela triumph over De Klerk in a landslide victory. Immediately the young first-up producer – immediately wanted to make the film. David had been trying to get the film going unsuccessfully for several years – a grant from Dutch foundation had had at least secured a until his co-producer took the film to Amsterdam and pitched at the FORUM. It was there that Sally Browning heard the pitch , saw there was an Australian angle and quickly got SBS interested, followed soon by Finland and a distributor Atlantis Alliance. At the same time she asked me if were interested in directing. It was April 1999 – I was working on THE

DIPLOMAT at the time. All hell was breaking loose in Timor and I was in no condition to think about the next film. But the story was extraordinary and it presented some interesting formal challenges, so I agreed.

Via the e-mail we got to quite an advanced stage of conceptualising and scripting the film. So when I eventually met David in Johannesburg in August 1999 I felt as if I knew many of the characters intimately. David had already filmed rough interviews with them on a handycam so I was able to see many of them looked like and what they had to say. Through Mannie David had virtually all the contacts - the drivers, the recruiters and the black operatives who distributed the arms!

David had also traced the Bedford. It had been rusting away in an old wrecking yard - alongside old army tanks and jeeps. He wanted to restore the truck in preparation for possible re-enactments.

Through the 80's and 90's my documentaries were mostly pure verite - grabbing material where I could to structure a character-driven story usually over more than a year. Accustomed to not planning too far ahead and being ready to turn corners and respond to ever changing situations, doing re-enactments offered a completely new way of working. But yet they seemed an obvious way to facilitate the telling of the story. It offered ever so much more control.

David and I exchanged many e-mails on the form these dramatisations would take. Originally my plan was that they would be pov's - impressions as opposed to realism. Then I thought why not involve one of the original drivers - who would play himself in the driving sequences. David, however took it one step further. He put the idea in my head to involve non-actors 'playing the tourists'. I was initially opposed to it, then I warmed to this idea. I started thinking beyond the raw rushes to what we could do with them in post.

Re-enactments are something many doc-makers shy away from. In the era of reality television, there seems to be a current orthodoxy at work in documentary which eschews any form of re-construction because it is a departure from the real. I made films since the late 70's which were as little interventionist as possible, now I wanted to do totally the opposite - create a series of images which could be

recognised as being entirely made up. My decision was to shoot the material in a conventional dramatic coverage – not like Errol Morris's hyper-exaggerated-realism as per THE THIN BLUE LINE. Instead of shooting slo-mo with extremely dramatic lighting, I wanted to apply the effects in pot. I wanted to muddy them – de-focus the realism. In the end we ended up applying a strobe to every shot and removing the colour replacing the original colour with a uniform brown cast.

The re-constructions were designed - but only to a point. Mostly, because we were unable to preview the locations, we had to rely a lot to spontaneity. We usually worked out a sequence of shots and blocked out the actors moves on the spot. It was documentary style approach to shooting drama. For this I relied a lot on ideas from our cinematographer, Roman Baska.

We put-up notices in back-packers lodges offering a 3 day drive to the Zimbabwe border and back including a tour of a game-park with free beer thrown-in. The free beer lasted a day! Our passengers enjoyed themselves so much! On the last day the unbelievable happened. One of our 'non-actors', came forward and told us he had worked for South African intelligence and that people in his unit were trying to uncover smuggling operations. This person said he now worked as a ranger for a national park, but he was prepared to talk about the past – though only in silhouette.

The interviews were done slowly and forensically. My technique was to set aside around two hours for each one – taking each person through the history of their involvement with the project. I had one distinct advantage – unlike David who knew many of the people - especially the drivers quite well, I was meeting them afresh. I was also helped by the fact that many were telling this story for the first time. In many cases even their close relatives had no knowledge of their involvement. Martha Molete - one of the internal operatives - rang her parents in Canada the night before the interview to tell them she was an arms courier – who, if captured, would have been incarcerated and probably killed.

My ruse with the tourists was not to tell brief then with the entire story of their deception ahead of time. We never actually told them they'd been sitting on guns until the actual interview. All they knew was that something was being smuggled. We didn't 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 passengers in the film, says it all.

The film's reception was very interesting. The Apartheid era is still very much a part of a recent lived history. The day after the screening a banner headline BUMS ON GUNS was splashed across the Sowetan – a newspaper which has a circulation of around a million amongst black South Africans. The participation of white ANC members was noted "as one of the more fascinating aspects". But what was even more controversial was that the arms were being moved in the period between 1991 and 1993 – at a time when the 'armed struggle' had allegedly stopped, and intense negotiations were underway between Mandela and De Klerk .

~~OUT~~

~~On the first research in South Africa I hit on the idea
an a day's uncontrolled shooting 1~~