**WATERLOO**

**My director’s notes**

*Waterloo*, my first film, was about a suburb that was about to be re-developed for public housing, and the existing community evicted. There were two key issues – what was going to happen to the existing community, mostly working class, but also what style of public housing was going to be built. There were already huge towers in Waterloo. At least two more were being planned.

I was involved with the Resident Action Movement at the time, and the Waterloo community I got to know through the video work I’d been doing. They weren’t against public housing, they wanted more public housing, but at a human level. That that was their target. There was evidence of people suiciding off the existing towers which were turning into ghettos.

I applied for a grant of $25k to the Creative development Branch of the Australian Film Commission. We got the money and we started filming, and one of the first scenes was a demonstration. A group of people including two women I selected to be the main characters – Margaret and Marsha Barry locked themselves inside houses to deter the developers. Green Bans were imposed in the area.

Up to this point I had filmed with black & white porta-pak video, but now I was filming on 16mm film, so I had to have a very good reason for every shot because of the expense involved – just putting 1 x 10 minute roll through the camera cost back then (not allowing for inflation) around $300 (at 1978 prices) by the time you processed it and got the workprint back.

Capturing an unfolding story you can’t be absolutely sure of what was going to happen next, especially when it comes to government decision making, which is very much directed by which part is in power. It so happened that around a year before we started shooting, there was a change of government in NSW. Labor under Neville Wran won with a clear majority. Under the new housing minister, a decision was made not to proceed with the Waterloo redevelopment and so the residents had an unexpectedly quick victory.

It soon became obvious that the back-story had to become the film! The struggle to save a few blocks of houses in Waterloo needed to become a larger story of this working class suburb and its history. The idea was partly triggered by Margaret Barry - a woman who led these 'battlers'. Marg had lived all her life in a small terrace house that had become increasingly isolated by the devastation around her. She had a great sense of history. She knew every planning scheme, every government minister responsible for this urban 'blight'. It seemed to me sensible that this person who had 'been through it all' – should tell this story of 50 years of misguided urban planning and the dislocation it caused.

I had to readjust my whole plan for making this film. I began to dig up a whole lot of information about the struggles over affordable housing for low income people. I found out that there were eviction battles going on in the 30s in Sydney. They mirrored the kind of eviction battles that were happening in the 70’s …. in The Rocks and in Woolloomooloo. I also discovered pictorial materials and photographs that were relevant in the Mitchell Library and in the Fairfax archives. I even shot a small re-enactment inside a house which actually featured in one of the eviction battles at the time.

The other thing that was I found very interesting was how town planners in post war years had these crazy notions about public housing – that they were to be built in new suburbs in the wilderness - planned communities where low income people would live. One particular Cinesound newsreel that I found in my research at the NFSA summed it all up.

Sure - the planners had very good intentions in mind, but these areas quickly turned into the ghettos of Macquarie Fields and Mount Druitt and Minto. The inner city ‘slums’ were cleared, and what were real, vibrant communities broken up. People were uprooted. This what happened in the 50’s and 60’s – this was the lead-up to where my film started.

*Waterloo* is also mini history of the Housing Commission and inner city Labor. The film argues that the boys from the back lanes and who rose to power and prominence were the same people to respond most strongly to the post-war call for planning and progress – and who then became the agents for destroying their own community.

*Waterloo* was thus fashioned from a lot of archive, a lot of still images, newsreels, but all tied together with this one narration which was done by Margaret Barry who happened to also be the leader of the action group. We worked on the narration together.

Working with film gave me a lot of different creative possibilities. It really impressed on me just what an important asset a good editor is, and what can be done in the editing process. This ‘flat-bed’ editing was done on a machine called the Steenbeck. For me it was quite liberating because it was non-linear editing. Back in the early days of black and white video it was quite primitive. In other words when you started putting together a video tape you couldn’t stop, you couldn’t go back. It had to be linear. Because if you went back, often you just had to start again, and reassemble everything that you’d done, which could have been hours and hours of work.

As in all my subsequent films I started editing before I actually finished shooting. Jim Stevens, my editor, had other work at the time, so we edited in batches of 3 to 4 weeks each. It made it possible for me to go back, do more research, build up my thesis, and keep going.

It was really good to have somebody to collaborate with. It was bad enough directing yourself, producing yourself, and I know some directors that do it all themselves, but I really thought that editing was took a particular skill, and yes perhaps I could have learnt that skill, but more importantly it’s the discussion that I wanted: the debate around the editing table about story, about style, and about structure. I wanted to do this with somebody who had a bit of experience in the craft, because a documentary editor is not just a conventional editor in the sense of putting bits together according to a script, since there’s often no script in a documentary, and you have to essentially carve out a script out of what the director’s shot, and often there are gaps, often major gaps in the story, and you’ve got to find inventive ways of filling those gaps.

Making *Waterloo was* a real learning curve, and it was like going to film school making this particular film. We edited on and off for probably about eight or nine months, and eventually the film was ready. I had my first experience of looking at an answer print and going through the mix that was done with magnetic film. The magnetic film ran on large reel to reel projectors. There were six, or seven, or eight tracks, and it was pretty difficult actually, but still possible to do a reasonably thorough job. Certainly with ½ inch video it was *impossible*, as we had the one soundtrack, and it was mono. So 16mm was a big step forward as far as I was concerned creatively.

As soon as the film was screened I entered it into competition at the Sydney Film Festival Greater Union competition for best Australian documentary. The film won first prize, and went straight into the Filmmakers Co-op catalogue. Over the years it was (and still is) been rented by scores of people, community groups, Universities and TAFE colleges. I still get sales queries about it. The film’s a great example of how community action can have positive outcomes and influence planning at a local and state level. I believe it proved inspirational for many students who went on to work in the community sector. It highlights the deficiencies in the planning process, and the importance of people actually being consulted and in decision-making. What the film demonstrated is that sometimes people have to take action to get their voice heard..

Making our films was one thing, but showing them to audiences was another. It was the late 70's and early 80's - not that long ago! Yet it was still unheard-of for the ABC to buy-in independently made documentary. The little cinema in St Peter's Lane, Darlinghurst was, apart from the film festivals, and the educational market, our only window to the world. People flocked to this 100-seat screen, in the same way as they now flock to see Flickerfest or Tropfest. I remember making repeated representations to the documentary department of the ABC - and being told that, in spite of the prizes it received, my film was only of limited general appeal. It was not only me but also David Bradbury who had the same problem with his acclaimed film **Frontline**. Meetings were called, petitions gathered and letters written. Finally, by the mid 80’s, independent documentary moved-on to occupy its rightful place in the mainstream of public television.

We took *Waterloo* overseas, where we screened it at different festivals, but we also tried to sell it to television. Part of my trip involved going to Poland to meet relatives and also to find out about the new people’s movement “Solidarity” . Anyway, we screened to Polish television, and they said, “Oh but, even these large flats look like... looks glorious to us. You should see our own. They were built 30 years ago, and now they’re run down, to be demolished, but in their place we’re just going to build new ones like yours.” It wasn’t quite the response I expected.

*Waterloo* was screened at the Nyon Doc Film Festival, and this is where I met Robert Drew, the ‘father’ of Direct Cinema. Drew was the honoured guest at the Festival, and screened several films including Primary, Salesman etc. I ’d seen some of these films before – at the Ethnographic Film conference in Canberra in 1977. Seeing the Direct Cinema classics was truly inspirational, and it was going to have an effect on my filmmaking for years to come.

My subsequent films borrowed heavily the purity of that style, but unlike my mentors of the 70's I was not content to be just a 'fly-on-the-wall'. Besides observation I wanted to use a whole range of other devices: re-enactment, reflexive camera, acted voice-over. I also quickly came to the realisation that the camera was far from neutral. I call it ‘engaged observational’

I tried to sell the film to the ABC, but got turned down, as did many colleagues at that time making independent work. The excuse I got was ….”Waterloo is a highly localised story specific to the Sydney area”. I wrote a 2 page letter back to Andy Lloyd James, the Acting Director of Television Features pointing out that the film touched on an issue of major importance, notably “that communities claim from government the right to participate in decisions affecting the futures of their own areas.”, and that “this has been a constant theme recurring through the history of urban redevelopment in Australia”. I also mentioned that the film had been sold to film libraries, state departments of education, and tertiary institutions right across Australia… as well as playing in 8 international film festivals. The letter was to no avail, but it did prove to me how fearful the ABC was about giving independent voices any expression, especially those that had a strong point of view, no matter how well researched the story was.

What I learnt from making *Waterloo* – that changing the story structure mid-stream can often lead to a better film. This became one of the guiding principles of all my films – that you should always start a film provisionally. You **shouldn’t** know where the film’s going to end up, or where it’s going to take you – as you have good characters you’re following, and an unfolding narrative.

Tom Zubrycki, 2020