

# Leading Australian documentary filmmaker dies

Robin Anderson (1950-2002)

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Robin Anderson, rightly regarded as one of Australia's best documentary filmmakers, died on March 8, aged 51, after a nine-month struggle with cancer. Anderson was diagnosed with a rare form of the disease in June last year, the day before her last movie—*Facing the Music*—premiered at the Sydney Film Festival. A reluctant publicist of her own work, the quietly-spoken Anderson co-directed with Bob Connolly, her husband and filmmaking partner, five feature-length documentaries between 1983 and 2001 that have left an ineradicable mark on the genre.

Born in Perth, Western Australia, Anderson did not decide to become a filmmaker until she was almost 30. She matriculated from high school in 1967, then spent the following year in Europe, including six months in Paris where she witnessed the May-June general strike. Anderson returned to Western Australia to attend university, graduating three years later with an honours degree in economics and winning a federal government scholarship to study for a sociology masters degree at New York's Columbia University. While in New York she began to develop a serious interest in cinema and, after attending a film appreciation course, decided to become a filmmaker.

On completion of her degree, Anderson returned to Australia and began working as an assistant researcher for ABC television in Sydney in 1978, where she met and married Bob Connolly, already an experienced and successful television documentary director. Anderson persuaded Connolly to quit the ABC and begin making independent films. The couple established Arundel Productions and made the *Franklin River Journey* about the World Heritage listed river, then under threat by hydroelectric development. They followed this with

a series of history documentaries for Dick Smith, a multi-millionaire electronics retailer, and then moved to Papua New Guinea to commence work on *First Contact*, a feature-length documentary set in the country's isolated Highlands region.

While researching the project, Anderson discovered archival footage shot by Michael Leahy, one of three gold-prospecting brothers who ventured into the vast New Guinean interior in the 1930s and became the first Europeans to make contact with highland tribes. The Leahy brothers discovered more than a million highland natives, isolated by rugged mountain terrain and dense jungle, who had had no previous contact with the outside world. Anderson and Connolly skillfully combined this material with their own footage, including interviews with natives who still recalled the first meetings with the Leahy brothers, to build up a picture of highlands tribal life.

Produced on a miniscule budget, *First Contact* won 10 international awards, including the prestigious Cinéma du Réel at the Paris Ethnographic and Sociological Film Festival, and was nominated for an Oscar in 1984. It became the first of a "highlands" trilogy, which carefully detailed the impact of colonial exploitation on Papua New Guinea's highlanders.

For the second and third films in the trilogy—*Joe Leahy's Neighbours* (1988) and *Black Harvest* (1992)—Anderson and Connolly decided to dispense with hired film crews and began operating their own equipment (Connolly on camera and Anderson on sound). As Anderson later explained, this reduced costs substantially and allowed them to adopt a more intimate, almost novelistic approach. It also gave them the freedom to film their characters over extended

periods—in some cases over 18 months. In fact, this patient painstaking method characterised all of Anderson and Connolly's subsequent work.

*Joe Leahy's Neighbours* and *Black Harvest*, which also won Cinéma du Réel awards and other international prizes, covered a 10-year period in the life of Joe Leahy—the half-caste son of Michael and a young highlander girl—who became a wealthy coffee plantation owner and formed a turbulent commercial partnership with the local Ganiga tribe. The last of the trilogy examined how falling coffee prices destroyed the partnership and escalated into bitter fighting between the Ganiga and neighbouring tribes.

This powerful work, which stood in sharp relief to the prevailing vacuous one hour, made-for-television, documentaries, was followed by *Rats in the Ranks* (1996), a damning exposure of Tammany Hall-style politics in Leichhardt, an inner-Sydney local council, and *Facing the Music* (2001), a deeply personal account of the impact of government budget cuts on a professor of music at the University of Sydney.

For *Rats in the Ranks*, Anderson and Connolly spent months recording the backroom manoeuvres of local mayor Larry Hand to secure reelection. The political back-stabbing, press leaks, secret deals and favours with Labor party functionaries and so-called Independents were captured by the filmmakers, as Hand worked to muster the votes he needed to remain mayor. While the documentary never wavered in its local focus, Anderson and Connolly were exposing not just the sordid mayoral election, but implicitly shining a spotlight on the operations of official politics throughout Australia.

*Facing the Music*, the last film co-directed by Anderson and previously reviewed by the *World Socialist Web Site*, is probably her most accomplished work. It records a year in the life of Professor Ann Boyd, a talented classical composer and head of the music department at Sydney University, and the terrible impact of government budget cuts. This extraordinarily concentrated and dramatic work not only captures the politicisation of the normally reticent Boyd, who struggles determinedly to save the department from extinction, but records how ongoing cutbacks are destroying the health and careers of talented academics.

Anderson was rightly outraged that academics like Boyd were being driven out of the universities. As she

explained in one of her last interviews: “These are the people who nurture and encourage real talent, the ones that you remember all your life. The consequences of this are immeasurable.”

Long-lasting creative partnerships in filmmaking, particularly husband and wife teams, are unusual. Few survive the commercial stress and artistic demands of their work. The secret of Anderson and Connolly's 20-year professional relationship was a fearless confidence in their subject matter and characters.

As Anderson explained to one interviewer: “Beginning production is like travelling an unexplored river. You have to have a good boat and know that it is a good river. If the storyline on any project we consider is clear before beginning, then it is not worth telling, but the most important thing, and we are very conscious of this, is to be true to the characters who have allowed us into their lives.”

Anderson's death is a heartbreaking and irreplaceable personal loss for Connolly and their two young daughters, Katherine and Joanna. Her humane and fiercely honest approach to documentary filmmaking will long be remembered.

In a special memorial tribute the Australian Broadcasting Corporation is televising three of Anderson and Connolly's documentaries over the next three weeks. The screenings, which are scheduled at 11pm, begin on March 19 with *Facing the Music*, followed by *Rats in the Ranks* on March 26 and *Black Harvest* on April 2.



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