Clara Law speaks with WSWS

“Australia’s inhuman treatment of asylum seekers has to be confronted”

Richard Phillips
11 October 2004

Filmmaker Clara Law spoke with the World Socialist Web Site *in Sydney last month about her feature length documentary,* Letters to Ali.

Law was born in Macau, attended Hong Kong University, majoring in English literature, and began work at Radio Television Hong Kong in the late 1970s. From 1982-85 she studied at Britain’s National Film and Television School and returned to Hong Kong where she directed her first feature, The other half and the other half, *in 1988. Since then she has made six movies, including two (*Floating Life *[1996] and* The Goddess of 1967 *[2001]) in Australia, where she has lived with her partner and co-scriptwriter Eddie L. C. Fong since 1995.* Letters to Ali *is her first documentary and the only Australian movie selected for this year’s Venice Film Festival.*

Richard Phillips: How did the film come about?

Clara Law: It all began after I’d read a very moving article in the *Age* newspaper in 2002 by Trish [Kerbi] about her relationship with a young Afghan boy in detention. Because I’m a relatively recent arrival in Australia I could easily understand and empathise with Ali and what he was going through.

As you know, I come from a fiction film background, so my first reaction was to approach this as a written script. I got in touch with Trish. She visited us, explained the whole story and gave me all the documents on the case. The more I learnt about it, the more I realised that it had to be done immediately because it would take a year to write a script and even more time to organise funding and begin production. This was in September 2002 and things were moving very quickly. There were many ongoing developments, which also meant that any script would always have to be changed. So Eddie [Law’s partner] and I decided that it had to be a documentary and that we would start work on it immediately.

We didn’t exactly know how it would develop but felt that there would be some outlets available to show it—television, a DVD release or on the Internet—when it was completed. Our main concern was to make it as quickly as possible. But as soon as we started talking to people about it we received many offers of help. Someone lent us a more professional camera, another some sound recording gear and it quickly evolved with the assistance of a lot of people, as you can see from the credits. And this assistance was very spontaneous.

Instead of spending hours on the phone trying to convince people, as you do when making a feature film, we had immediate support. Obviously there were a lot of people like us who were very concerned about the issue, wanted to do something, but hadn’t found the right channels.

RP: Did this support catch you unawares?

CL: Yes, I was pleasantly surprised. For example, composer Paul Grabowsky, who is very busy and has all sorts of projects lined up at least a year in advance, immediately agreed to write and perform the music. He said the film should be a wakeup call to Australia. And this response was not just here but also from overseas.

The licensing rights of Dolby Lab usually cost a huge amount of money but they only charged us five percent of the normal fee. Similarly, the transfer from video to film was inexpensive. We asked the company to visit our web site, which they did, and so they gave us a huge discount.

RP: This is your first documentary and touches on a number of political issues.

CL: That’s true, but I didn’t set out to make a political film. When you start talking about the detention of asylum seekers, and particularly the children, then it is obviously political but we believed that this practise is cruel and inhumane and therefore had to be examined and confronted immediately. It was as simple as that.

I happen to be a filmmaker—I have a craft and can use it—and was prepared to spend a year of my life on this project because it had to be done. I know that if I hadn’t made the time then I’d have really regretted it later in life.

The most disturbing issue for us was the treatment of refugees in detention. They are deliberately humiliated and made to feel like they’re second rate individuals, barely human beings. This is revolting and entirely unnecessary.

Obviously the government needs to know where people come from. But why lock them up? Surely they could be allowed to work during the day—to make their lives more meaningful while

their applications are being processed.

Imagine what it is like to not know your future from one day to the next, and to be in this state for months and even years. What must that do to a person and especially to young kids? How can they ever understand why they're being treated like that? The psychological damage must be incredible.

I think there is an underlying racism involved in all this. Most of the people locked up are black or brown—they're no white people. There are many British people who overstay their visas but they're not treated like this. I'm not suggesting that they should be locked up but that there are double standards being applied. How does the government explain this?

RP: An important aspect of the film is that it demonstrates that—contrary to the government and the media claims—ordinary people oppose mandatory detention.

CL: We hope that as more people become informed about the real situation they will do what they can to change these policies. And they will do the sort of things that Trish and Rob have been doing. Maybe not everyone will be able to contribute the same amount of time this family has but my hope is that the film will motivate them to do something.

When I first came to Australia I thought it was very free and democratic but now realise that democracy can be easily abused and is nothing if there is no morality guiding it. This is what is happening with the current government, which seems to be motivated by economic rationalism and material gains by any means possible. This is very dangerous because if we don't have any moral guidelines. I'm not talking about morality in a religious sense, but a basic understanding about what is good or bad. Of course people can find a way to justify their actions, even though they may know that something is wrong, but deep inside they are violating an innate sense of good and bad.

RP: There are certainly moral issues involved but there are also political questions. One criticism I have of the film is that it doesn't sufficiently explore the roots of this policy or that Labor introduced mandatory detention. For example the interviews with Ian MacPhee [former immigration minister] and [former Prime Minister] Fraser do not attempt to explain why these cruel and undemocratic measures are being used today.

CL: I didn't realise mandatory detention was introduced by Labor. The interview with Fraser was longer but I didn't put it all in because I think that if it gets too complicated then audiences can't follow it.

RP: His conclusion was that people and governments were "imperfect".

CL: He also said that racism and religious bigotry will come back to haunt us if we don't do something about it now. This covers enough ground for those who are thinking about the issues and the consequences more deeply.

RP: Over the past year there's been a surge in popularity for political documentaries—*Fahrenheit 9/11* being the most obvious example. Why do you think this has occurred?

CL: People are obviously discontented about many things and looking for ways to express it. But it is not just political documentaries but documentaries in general. Maybe they believe that there is more truth in these than fiction films or that they learn more from them. I'm a fiction filmmaker and used to see a lot of movies but nowadays I don't watch many at all because most of the time I'm dissatisfied. And I don't think that I'm alone. In general fiction films are going backwards.

Secondly, technology has advanced so that it is easier to make documentaries. The new lightweight equipment is less intrusive and allows you to establish a more intimate relationship with the subject. Also because of the way the world is run people feel very powerless. Everything is controlled one way or the other, whether you're aware of it or not.

Some people may feel they know why and others don't but there is a general discontent. A lot of people are also lost—they don't know what is going on or perhaps it's hard for them to find out—and so they just try to get on with their lives.

RP: But there is also a growing politicisation of ordinary people. The global demonstrations against the war in Iraq last year, increasing opposition to the Australian government's refugee detention policies and the widespread support you received to make *Letters to Ali*, are just a few examples.

CL: Yes and this tension is becoming more and more extreme and it is global.

The Q & A session after the *Letters to Ali* screenings at the Toronto Film Festival was very good. The audience response was passionate with people asking what they could do to help with Ali's case. Should they write to the Australian government? They wanted to find out what the options were.

Although there is no easy answer to the question of asylum seekers it is a global question and one of the most important issues in the twenty-first century. The Australian government, however, is responding to this in a very cruel way and thinks that this is OK. The question is: does society want to do something about it?