

54th Sydney Film Festival—Part 3

Some documentaries from China, Israel and Australia

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This is the third in a series of articles on the 2007 Sydney Film Festival, held June 8-24.

Part 1 appeared on July 4 and Part 2 on July 10.

Each year the number of documentaries screened at international film festivals seems to increase. As feature filmmakers struggle to deal with contemporary issues, documentarians appear more willing to take up the challenge of examining various political and social questions. This obviously relates to marked differences in production costs, as well as improvements in portable filmmaking equipment.

The new technology has made possible a range of approaches—from tightly-scripted narrations and detailed research, to more personal observational, and thus intimate, styles. In fact, almost anyone can put together a documentary. But this has only served to highlight problems of quality and intellectual depth.

Several documentary offerings at the Sydney festival are probably best forgotten; others carefully explored issues that the corporate media has no intention of touching.

Challenging racism and defending democratic rights

A number of Australian documentaries screened at the festival grappled, some more successfully than others, with important political issues—anti-Muslim racism, torture and the impact of imperialist war.

In Our Name by Chris Tuckwell is a powerful exposure of how the US government has used the so-called “war on terror” to launch an unprecedented campaign to justify and expand the use of torture and rendition—the transfer of prisoners by the US to third countries for torture. The film was produced with support from local medical services that provide treatment and rehabilitation for torture survivors. Up to 3,000 New South Wales residents are victims of torture in their former homelands.

Using interviews with a range of human rights activists, academics, former torturers and victims, and dramatised re-enactments, *In Our Name* demonstrates that the US torture in Abu Ghraib was not the product of so-called “bad apples” in the military, but came from further up the command chain. The methods used, it makes clear, were not new but have been widely employed by US authorities and their various puppet regimes over decades.

Figures such as Australian academic Mirko Bagaric, who has called for legislation allowing torture, is given time to outline his chilling stance. He claims torture to be a “morally defensible interrogation technique” and declares that “It’s perverse not to torture”. His arguments are powerfully

and systematically demolished.

While *In Our Name* makes no direct reference to the Howard government’s collaboration with the Bush administration in the illegal detention and torture of Australian citizens, David Hicks and Mamdouh Habib, the inferences are clear enough.

The documentary contains a mountain of evidence that could be presented in any future trial of those who have carried out war crimes under the US-led “war on terror.”

Temple of Dreams by Tom Zubrycki centres on Fadi Rahman, a young Lebanese-Australian and smash repair worker, who runs a youth centre and gymnasium. The movie highlights the rise of anti-Arab racism, the Cronulla race riots (December 2005) and the difficulties facing young Muslims in urban Australia.

The centre is located in a former Masonic Temple in Sydney’s southwestern suburbs, where unemployment is high and there are few sporting and social facilities for young immigrants. It is virtually self-funded, with little or no financial assistance from state or local governments or the official Muslim organisations. The documentary charts the efforts of Rahman, three young Muslim girls and their supporters to prevent the local council from shutting the gymnasium down.

Zubrycki has been making documentaries since the 1970s and he is rightly angered by assaults on immigrants. *Temple of Dreams* is a strong and polished work and constitutes an important antidote to the racist garbage dominating much of Australia’s talkback radio and the Murdoch media. The documentary has one glaring omission, however: it fails to deal with the role of the “opposition” Labor Party.

The opening titles refer to the Howard government’s attacks on immigrants, and there is footage of former NSW Liberal leader Peter Debnam calling for 500 Lebanese youth to be locked up. But Zubrycki does not mention the positions of the NSW Labor government, which has constantly slandered and mobilised police against young Australian-Lebanese. Zubrycki shot more than 200 hours for *Temple of Dreams*. It seems likely that countless references to the Laborites by local youth, and others, were excluded.

Bomb Harvest by Kim Morduant and Sylvia Wilczynski follows bomb-defusing teams in Laos. As is now well known, Laos was extensively bombed 35 years ago during the Vietnam War. According to the documentary, it is the most heavily bombed country in the world.

While the US government denied its illegal military assault against Laos, tons of missiles and bombs, as well as tens of thousands of litres of Agent Orange, were dropped on the under-developed country. Today the country remains covered with unexploded ordnance and is still suffering the consequences of birth deformities and other horrors.

Grinding rural poverty in Laos and a global demand for scrap metal has

precipitated an illegal but expanding business in bomb scrap metal, with local children increasingly drawn into the deadly trade. More than 6,000 Laotians, including hundreds of children, have been killed by these bombs since the war ended. Thousands more have been maimed.

Bomb Harvest depicts the dedication and bravery of those trying to clear up the legacy of the war, more than 30 years after the US was defeated in Vietnam.

Laith Stevens, a former Australian army soldier, is the leading bomb disposal expert in the film, and responsible for training local Laotians in this dangerous and deadly work.

Towards the end of the movie, Stevens admits to the filmmakers that he had wanted to participate in the first Gulf War. "Now I've seen what happened here [in Laos] and what it does to people and countries, I would not be so keen."

Three Israeli documentaries

The three Israeli documentaries screened in Sydney this year—*Hot House*, *9 Star Hotel* and *Bridge over the Wadi*—reveal some of the tremendous problems facing Palestinians and Israeli Arabs. None of these films, however, provides an historical overview of the geo-political factors that led to the Israeli state's creation.

Hot House by Shimon Dotan was shot inside Israel's Bersheba, Ashkelon, Hadarim and Megiddo jails. Since 1967, more than 650,000 Palestinians, or about 20 percent of the Palestinian population, have been detained in Israeli jails. More than 10,000 Palestinians are currently incarcerated in the high-security prisons—many serving multiple life sentences.

Prisoners are divided according to the organisations they support—Fatah or Hamas. As one prison official admits, authorities would have little control without maintaining these political divisions and working with the Palestinian faction leadership in the jails.

Israeli prison officials, who were obviously on their best behaviour during filming, are generally presented in a favourable light. And *Hot House* fails to mention the ongoing violations of prisoners' basic democratic rights, including the detention of hundreds of Palestinian children. It also keeps silent on the fact that each year Israel's attorney-general receives scores of torture complaints, but none is investigated.

The documentary features detailed interviews with prisoners—men and women—in which they explain their life inside the jails, what they were charged with and their determination to fight the Zionist regime.

Ahlam Tamimi, a Hamas supporter and former news announcer on Palestinian television, frankly discusses her part in two suicide terrorist attacks in Jerusalem. The interview is chilling and another tragic example of the bankrupt perspective of the Hamas leadership, which callously uses suicide bombers as bargaining chips in their attempts to secure a deal with the Zionist regime.

Contrary to Tamimi's claims, the bombing of civilian targets does not assist the Palestinian masses one iota, but plays directly into the hands of the Israeli state, which responds with even more repressive measures. The Palestinian people cannot be liberated by such reactionary and self-defeating methods. They require an entirely different perspective, based on the development of a united struggle of workers of all nationalities, cultures and religions in the Middle East against imperialism and all its agents.

The film concludes in February 2006 during elections for the Palestinian Authority, with several of the interviewed prisoners running as candidates. It records prisoners' responses to the Hamas election victory. No attempt is made to explain the distinction between Hamas and Fatah or why Fatah

has lost political credibility amongst broad sections of the Palestinian population.

All in all, *Hot House* constitutes a warning to Israel's ruling elite that the ongoing mass detention of Palestinians will not stop the resistance—hence the documentary's title.

Bridge over the Wadi documents the establishment of a mixed religious school, the first Arab-Jewish educational institution, located in an Arab village, Qafir Kara, near Israel's border with the West Bank.

Two teachers are assigned to every class and the children are taught Hebrew and Arabic and "mutual respect" for Islam, Christianity and Judaism. Attended by 50 Jewish and 50 Arab students, the movie documents the first year of the school's operation.

The children, of course, quickly make friends and are perfectly comfortable with the multi-lingual teaching methods. These scenes are moving, and they puncture international media and Israel government claims that Arabs and Jews are inherently incompatible.

The documentary exposes some of the tensions between the teachers and the objections of a number of Jewish parents, who decided that teaching children mutual respect should not extend to Jewish children reading from the Koran. One Jewish grandmother is deeply suspicious about her grandson playing with Arab children after school hours. Tensions also arise between the Muslim and Jewish teachers over how to explain the dispossession of the Palestinian people.

These issues are somehow resolved, although the documentary does not show how, and the film concludes with titles explaining that enrolments at the school increased the following year. Numerous questions are left unanswered though, and no information is provided about what was going on politically in Israel at the time.

While teaching children mutual respect is important, neither these efforts, nor various moral appeals, will overcome the myriad problems generated by the Zionist state and its ongoing assaults on the Palestinian people. The documentary fails to mention, let alone explore, the anti-Palestinian and anti-Muslim racism that underpins official cultural life in Israel.

Ido Haar's *9 Star Hotel* is not a technically sophisticated work, but it is the best of the three Israeli documentaries. It follows a group of young Palestinians illegally working inside Israel. The construction workers are forced to live in secret shantytowns in the hills and valleys near work sites, risking life and limb to cross Israeli borders and somehow provide an income for their families.

The intimate documentary records the desperate conditions the men endure—freezing winter temperatures, summer heat and being constantly on the run from Israeli police. Haar, who spent lengthy periods with the young building workers, is clearly an honest and courageous filmmaker who could have been jailed if caught by Israeli police.

The ability of these Palestinian workers to maintain their precarious existence, however, will end with further extensions of Israel's so-called Separation Fence—a series of 25-foot high concrete walls, with electronic sensors and numerous watch towers stretching more than 750 kilometres around the West Bank.

China

Please Vote for Me is a 55-minute movie directed by Weijun Chen and produced under the auspices of Why Democracy, an international non-government organisation. Weijun's film is about an election campaign for class monitor amongst a group of seven-year-old third-grade students in Wahun province, China.

The director follows the three candidates at school, and at home, where

they are coached by their ambitious parents. The children are taught how to make campaign speeches. Some parents tell their children how to undermine the confidence of their rivals. There are back-room promises for votes and gifts. The emotional highs and lows of the campaign and final class room speeches by the candidates are recorded.

How all this is supposed to help seven-year-old children—or anybody else for that matter—understand genuine democracy is not clear. Nor is it explained whether this process occurs in all Chinese primary schools, or how it may be connected to or contrasted with the lack of democratic rights in China. Ironically the principal task of the class monitor is to maintain discipline, as directed by the teacher, over the other children in the class.

Unfortunately, Weijun’s movie only succeeds in being insufferably cute and depressing at the same time. What about the right of children to have a childhood?

Feet Unbound, directed by Ng Khee Jin, was inspired by several recent books about female participants in the Chinese Communist Party’s 1934-37 “Long March”. The documentary’s title is a reference to the ancient and permanently crippling practice of footbinding, which was mainly imposed on young girls from aristocratic and wealthy Chinese families. This is somewhat confusing because the young girls who joined the Long March, many not even teenagers, were from peasant families. Anyone whose feet had been bound would simply not have been able to walk any distance, let alone participate in the march.

Ng Khee Jin’s documentary retraces the path taken by the Western Route Army—a section of the march—and has interviews with six surviving women, now in their 90s. It looked like it might be promising. The director, after all, lived in Australia and was therefore not subject to Beijing’s censorship. But disappointingly, *Feet Unbound* is superficial and a wasted opportunity.

The 87-minute movie certainly reveals the horrendous conditions endured by its participants—the starvation and brutality, and the rape and bloody massacres by local warlords aligned with Chiang Kai-shek’s Kuomintang. Descriptions by the women marchers of their desperate trek across rivers, mountains and the uninhabited high altitude marshlands of the Tibetan plateau are deeply moving.

The women explain that they joined the march to escape the grinding poverty and prevailing social backwardness, including the practice of child brides, with some girls even married off at the age of seven. As one woman says, her life had alternated between having no food one day and being beaten on the next.

Feet Unbound points out that the Communist Party failed to acknowledge the contribution made by these women, and it continues to treat some of them as second class citizens. One march veteran was beaten by Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution. They wanted to know why she had survived the march.

The director’s decision to have Elly Zhen Ying, a 28-year-old journalist from Beijing, act as the film’s anchor while it retraces the march, is a major flaw. According to film notes, the journey allowed her to “gain more insights into herself and the gravity of life.” This is no doubt true, but not all that helpful for those trying to understand the political significance of the events depicted in the film. Much of her commentary is simply inane.

At one point, Elly Zhen comments that she usually has an MP3 player when walking, but doesn’t need it as she follows the march because the scenery is so spectacular. She is “amazed” that none of this natural beauty is mentioned in any of the survivors’ accounts.

Feet Unbound’s most serious weakness, though, is that it fails to examine the political origins and consequences of the Long March, let alone explain that it was another reflection of the Communist Party’s political abandonment of the working class.

The defeat of the Chinese revolution in 1927 was a direct result of

Stalin’s so-called “two-stage theory”, under which the working class was told to back Chiang Kai-shek’s Kuomintang. Following its terrible defeat, the Communist Party abandoned the major cities and established so-called rural soviets. Its perspective led to the transformation of the organisation into a peasant-based movement which, in turn, produced the disastrous Long March. More than 170,000 marchers were wiped out during the desperate trek.

Given that Beijing and various “lefts” still romanticise what proved to be a disaster, the documentary could have challenged their claims. *Feet Unbound*, unfortunately, only adds to the general political confusion about the real—anti-working class—character of the Chinese Communist Party and China’s ruling bureaucracy.



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