

Sydney Film Festival

“I’m interested in a documentary and fiction hybrid”: filmmaker Kriv Stenders speaks with WSWS

Richard Phillips

24 July 2007

Filmmaker Kriv Stenders graduated from the Australian Film, Television and Radio School (AFTRS) in 1989 with a major in cinematography. Like many of his fellow graduates, Stenders shot and directed music videos, television commercials and documentaries until 2005, when he made his first two features—*The Illustrated Family Doctor* and *Blacktown*.

Stenders spoke with the World Socialist Web Site about *Boxing Day*, his latest feature, which was screened at the recent Sydney Film Festival (see “Australian reflections”).

Richard Phillips: Could you explain how and why you made *Boxing Day*?

Kriv Stenders: I’d made two films before *Boxing Day*—*The Illustrated Family Doctor*, a traditionally financed and made film, and *Blacktown*, a kind of no-budget feature. In 2005 the Adelaide Film Festival director Katrina Sedgwick, who was a big fan of *Blacktown*, asked me whether I was interested in developing a digital feature along the same lines, which they would fund.

RP: Were there any parameters specified?

KS: Not really. *Blacktown* was shot on digital and with non-professional actors and improvised scenes. Katrina was very interested in this sort of approach, which I call ‘live filmmaking’.

This method attempts to create a more organic and fluid atmosphere on the set and is opposed to the traditional approach, where you film a story and then cut it. I’m more interested in filming, writing and shooting concurrently, in a similar way to documentaries.

For example, although the story is already pre-determined, it’s not written in the traditional script format, but more like a story outline. Everybody knows where the story is going—the beginning, the middle and the end—and who the characters are. What is left open to interpretation and for the actors to play with is how the scenes are articulated and how

the characters present themselves. It’s a bit like improvising music or jazz—there’s a basic structure but you can riff off it.

RP: Who or what inspired you to take this direction?

KS: I was really influenced by the Dogme 95 movement, which began in Denmark in the mid-90s and rejected the traditional filmmaking mechanisms. While they had their ten commandments, which forced filmmakers to work within tight parameters, these limitations actually freed you.

I was also obviously attracted to John Cassavetes and his film work in the 1960s and 70s. His approach—of trying to create truth in cinema and to reflect reality back as much as possible—was a big inspiration.

RP: But your movies are somewhat different from much of the Dogme material?

KS: Their work was basically a starting point. The point is to try and free yourself up and not worry about the fact that you’re not shooting on film or using a tripod or worrying about cost factors, time and the other creative restrictions generally associated with traditional filmmaking.

RP: What interests me about *Boxing Day* and *Blacktown* is their subject matter. Very few Australian movies deal with urban Aboriginal people. In fact, I can’t think of any others. Why have you decided to make this a focus?

KS: It was really by circumstance more than anything else. I’d worked with Tony Ryan [*Blacktown*] and Richard Green [*Boxing Day*] about ten years ago in a short film called *Two/Out*. I was casting for that film and asked NSW Corrective Services if there were any people on parole who were willing to get some acting experience and so I met Richard and Tony. We did the same thing with a similar department in South Australia and the fellow that played the drug dealer at the beginning of *Boxing Day* was discovered this way.

I’m interested in a hybrid between documentary and fiction—to draw as much as possible from reality, because

it's rich, complex and original, and then frame it within a fictional story. I'd also made a choice a while back not to work with professional actors, because actors can only go so far in terms of depicting a character. If you're going to create a character who is a felon, then why not go to the source and have people play a part of themselves.

I'm a middle class guy who grew up in Brisbane and didn't know any Aboriginals up until that point. I'd never really socialised with this community, so meeting Tony and Richard brought to me a whole universe of life experiences and circumstances that I didn't realise existed, but which was quite exotic and very fertile.

Part of my role as director in *Blacktown* and *Boxing Day* was to allow the actors to really own the characters and help them play a version of themselves. Naturally their Aboriginality comes out in their stories.

RP: Why do you think there have been so few movies made about urban Aborigines?

KS: Maybe there's concern that this subject might not attract audiences or a latent creative fear about exploring this world because the issues are not easy and it's not necessarily what people want to hear about. It's also a world that's very difficult to depict accurately or without people like Richard and Tony. I guess it's a combination of all those things.

RP: It's also a very political issue. It was no doubt coincidental, but *Boxing Day* touches on the question of pedophilia, which is an issue now being seized upon by the Howard government to launch its attack on Aboriginal communities.

KS: This element in the story wasn't entirely coincidental. About a year ago I read a report in the *Herald* about Aboriginal child abuse and it did affirm that the film we were writing was a prescient issue and one that was happening in the community. We certainly weren't inventing anything, but were reflecting back reality.

At the same time, I was very conscious in *Blacktown* and *Boxing Day* about not beating people over the head or to have themes which become Trojan horses and take over the movie. The trick is to do it subtly and realistically because your film can get hijacked by certain ideas, become very hysterical and turn people off.

RP: There are a number of recent movies in Australia—it's almost a genre—dealing with the plight of working class youth. Many of these movies are very demoralised, but *Boxing Day* is quite different. It explores the difficult social circumstances facing its characters but contains an element of hope.

KS: I guess *Blacktown* and *Boxing Day* are somewhat traditional in this regard. It's very easy to end on a pessimistic note or to have negative energy run through a

film. It's much harder to end on a positive note, which feels real but is also elegant and subtle. This is always the challenge.

We had a lot of discussion about how to end *Boxing Day*. Would the guitar and singing at the end be over the top? Was it too much? I guess it's intuitive, but I think the way the movie ends works well.

RP: It looks like a one-take movie. Is that the case and were you influenced by Aleksandr Sokurov's *Russian Ark*?

KS: Ostensibly *Boxing Day* is a real-time 82-minute shot, but in fact it's made up from 12 separate takes shot over a five-day period and merged together.

Yes, I saw *Russian Ark* and another one-take movie called *Timecode*. I felt that they were interesting but ultimately failures because they didn't really exploit this technique in the most effective manner and use it to tell a linear story. I believed that, rather than get too avant-garde or abstract, if we had a strong enough narrative and let it play out in real time it would be very effective.

RP: What have been audience reactions to *Boxing Day* and will it get a theatrical release?

KS: The audience response has been very positive. As you know *Boxing Day* is not a romp in the park—it's dealing with tough issues—but people have been engaged and really moved by it.

Usually films are made with a distributor already attached, but *Boxing Day* was made the other way around. We're currently talking to distributors to see if we can get a theatrical release. So we hope that will happen, and that there'll be some money to promote it. We were able to get a DVD release for *Blacktown*, but it's a long process and you have to be patient and diligent.



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