

# Dee McLachlan writer/director of *The Jammed* speaks with WSWS

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The *Jammed*, a low-budget feature written and directed by Dee McLachlan about sex trafficking in Australia, was ignored by this year's Melbourne International Film Festival. Eventually given a 10-day screening five weeks ago at a Melbourne cinema, support for the movie has forced local cinemas to screen it in Australian state capitals. McLachlan recently spoke with the World Socialist Web Site about her film.

WSWS: While Lukas Moodysson's *Lilya4ever* explores similar issues it has an underlying religious message. Your movie is very different. It's a thriller, touches on the subsidiary role played by government authorities and to some extent shows that the criminals running these operations have establishment connections. Could you comment?

DM: There is an American television program called *Human Trafficking* with Donald Sutherland, whose approach to the subject is totally black and white. The investigators eventually move in, people are gunned down, the criminals are killed and an undercover police agent almost dies. Reality, of course, is a lot different and so I made a deliberate choice that *The Jammed* would show this.

There is certain complicity on a range of levels—from clients, the brothel owners, to governments and corrupt immigration officials and police. Some girls caught up in this business were sold into prostitution by their parents and at a very young age, and some of the criminals fall in love with the girls. The issue is not simply black and white, but more like a grey soup and the various sides have to be revealed.

WSWS: Could you tell me about some of the distribution difficulties you had?

DM: It was quite hard at first. In fact, we were struggling to get any distributor interested. Many told

us that they liked the movie but there was no real belief that there was an audience for it and so we resigned ourselves to a DVD distribution deal. I then met another filmmaker, John L. Simpson, who wanted to start a distribution company and we were able to get it onto one cinema screen in Melbourne a few weeks before the DVD release.

We then got some good media reviews, which helped, and it took off from there, mainly via word-of-mouth. Within a matter of days we were getting calls and were able to get national theatrical releases.

WSWS: This sort of word-of-mouth promotion in Australia is a relatively new phenomenon.

DM: Yes. We suddenly started getting calls and within a few days we were posting hard-drives with digital copies for screening in theatres around Australia. It would have been impossible, financially and logistically, to do a theatrical print release so quickly.

WSWS: What problems did you have getting financial backing for the movie?

DM: In a normal funding process you get a distributor on board first, go through various funding bodies—maybe two or three—and then probably have to organise one or two pre-sales. It's a difficult process and ultimately it means that you're being funded by a committee.

All this means that movies which are a bit hard edged and don't appear to have an immediate audience are generally not made. Consequently there are very few social or political films generated in Australia, even though political thrillers are quite a big genre in the US. I can't even think of a political thriller being made in Australia.

WSWS: The only recent one I can think of is Philip Noyce's *The Quiet American*.

DM: Yes, but it must be the only one because this

genre doesn't get much support and there are other projects like mine that are struggling for finance. There is one about refugees that I know of that has a good script but the filmmaker can't get any funding.

There are lots of American documentaries that hammer the government—movies by Michael Moore and other filmmakers who probe all kinds of political issues—but there's almost nothing from here. And that's because to get a documentary funded you have to do it through the ABC or SBS and other very formal and restrictive funding channels. These processes tend to stop or silence provocative voices.

WSWS: But there is a growing audience for these issues.

DM: That's true, but I didn't set out to make a political statement about our society. Maybe because it's an election year and people are drawn to political issues but what has been interesting is the popular engagement with my movie. We've had lots of supportive letters—hand-written letters and emails—from people congratulating us and saying 'well done', 'the movie should be compulsory viewing' and so on, and even offering help to promote the film. This has been amazing and something I've never experienced in the normal filmmaking process.

WSWS: You were born and raised in South Africa under apartheid. What sort of pressure was exerted on local artists during that time?

DM: Fortunately I had fairly forward thinking parents and our family debated political and other issues openly. But growing up in South Africa at that time you constantly felt that information was being withheld. It was obviously an openly segregated society and the politicians were very paternalistic and motivated by doing things only for the white population.

In South Africa if your skin was black you could be dragged away in the middle of the night by authorities and you would have no representation. Similar sorts of things are developing here, and especially if you're a Muslim or an Aborigine or against the government. I left South Africa and eventually moved to Australia and yet I feel that I'm sliding back into that kind of world and political mindset that I grew up in. Australian government politicians voice the same kind of language. There is a 1950s paternalistic view of the world, the "war on terror" and the attitude that they know what's best for everyone.

WSWS: Australian censorship laws are also becoming increasingly more hard-line.

DM: People in South Africa always had to be careful about how they voiced their views, especially if they disagreed with the politics of the day. But censorship of artists and the press is always a bad thing. You only have to look at what happened in the US after September 11, where those opposing the war in Iraq were denounced as being unpatriotic. The disaster of the US government ignoring the views of the people meant that America landed itself in its worst military debacle in history.

WSWS: Has your filmmaking always been motivated by political issues?

DM: Not really. In South Africa my early film career went through a process of self-censorship, although I wasn't really aware of it. I guess I felt it was too difficult to make movies with political and social messages and so I made movies about animals and pure entertainment things.

The change occurred after I'd lived in a few different countries and immigrated, first to America and then Australia. Immigration is a very debilitating process, because you have to start from nothing all over again and rebuilding takes time. It takes you several years to get back on your feet and this process has made me more socially aware. Now all of my films have some sort of social relevance, whether it's a drama, thriller or comedy.

WSWS: And your next film?

DM: I'm desperately trying to raise enough money to make a movie about a hostage crisis and extraordinary rendition. I want to shoot this in Australia, and possibly Pakistan, and to get it out as soon as possible, because of the relevance and importance of this issue.



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