

“It was grueling subject matter and seemed unending”

Documentary producer Eva Orner speaks with WSWS

Richard Phillips
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*Film producer Eva Orner spoke last week with the World Socialist Web Site about her involvement in the Oscar-winning *Taxi to the Dark Side*. Directed by Alex Gibney, the feature-length documentary is a detailed exposure of American use of torture in Afghanistan, Iraq and Guantánamo Bay. The film is currently on limited cinema release in America cinemas and a 52-minute version was televised in Europe, Japan and Australia late last year.*

Richard Phillips: First of all congratulations on the Oscar.

Eva Orner: Thank you. It's been a bit of a whirlwind but I think my feet are back on the ground now.

RP: How did you get involved in *Taxi to the Dark Side*?

EO: I was working with Alex Gibney for two and a half years, just after I moved to New York from Australia. He had just finished directing and producing *Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room*, a very successful feature documentary, and *Taxi* was the next project.

Alex had been involved in lengthy discussions with friends and colleagues in New York who were angry and disgusted with the Bush administration. He was frustrated that not enough people were speaking out about what had happened at Abu Ghraib and what this government was really doing, and wanted to rouse up a reaction to it. Various private investors then decided to put money into the project and it got underway.

RP: This was about 18 months after the Abu Ghraib revelations?

EO: Yes. There'd been all sorts of publicity about Abu Ghraib—it was on the cover of *Time*—and there'd been a wave of outrage and then nothing. The media dropped it and the government seemed to have gotten away with it.

I was so naïve when we started making *Taxi* that I said—“Gosh, what happens if this is all irrelevant by the time we've finished the documentary.” But with Bush vetoing legislation to stop torture and other things going on, it is now more relevant than ever.

Of course, we're not happy that it's relevant. We wish the

situation wasn't the way it is, but hopefully our film will have an impact on the issue. HBO is going to screen it uncut in September, not long before the elections.

RP: What were your thoughts as the project began to evolve, as you began assembling the material?

EO: While there wasn't much that we didn't already know—we were all pretty well read on the subject—a lot of things did shock us. It was such a tough film to make, not because it was physically difficult, but it was such grueling subject matter and it seemed unending.

When I first found out about how Dilawar, the taxi driver, died I was really shocked. He was severely beaten above the knee and had a pulmonary embolism which killed him. But I was also surprised that the US military simply marked his death certificate as a homicide and didn't even think about it. Of course, this directly implicated them in his murder, which was then unearthed by a *New York Times* journalist.

The death of this innocent young Afghan murdered in custody by the military became a metaphor for the whole film and all that has happened with the Bush administration's endorsement of torture over the last five years.

One of the most powerful moments in the movie for me is the comment from Tony Lagouranis, a military interrogator. Alex Gibney, who was interviewing, asked him what he thought about Cheney's statement that the US had to go over to the dark side after 9/11. Tony had seen terrible things in war situations but he simply replied: “I think that is bullshit. We have to be as good as we can be.”

In other words, he knew that it's necessary to set the highest standards. It doesn't matter whether you're American or Australian, Iraqi or whatever, it's an individual and collective responsibility to set the bar—to establish the highest human standards—and be as good as one can be. This is very powerful and important.

RP: You told the media after the Oscar award that the Bush administration were war criminals.

EO: Yes, but I probably shouldn't go into that any more. I got into a bit of trouble over it but I'll tell you that there is nothing in what I said that I regret or that I don't believe.

RP: Trouble from whom?

EO: Nobody in particular but there was a lot of chatter on the internet and other places about it. But again, I would never renege on that statement, and I stand by it completely. I'm just not going to repeat it again at the moment.

RP: But you have thousands of people in America and elsewhere demanding that Bush and others be impeached or charged with war crimes.

EO: That's true but I can't see it happening unfortunately because they seemed to have legislated to protect themselves on so many different levels.

RP: Did you follow what happened to David Hicks, who was incarcerated in Guantánamo for more than five years?

EO: Absolutely and I saw the film made about his father—*The President versus David Hicks*. As you know, we interviewed Moazzam Begg, who was in Guantánamo for a couple of years, and other people who were wrongly incarcerated, but David Hicks was held there for over five years. I understand that most of that was in solitary. I just don't have words for that kind of cruelty; it's incongruous and what is it supposed to achieve? John Howard, who I was obviously not a fan of, could have gotten him out of Guantánamo earlier and yet he refused to do so.

This blatant disregard for humanity is astonishing and even after David Hicks was returned to Australia he has been gagged from speaking to the media for 12 months. I've never heard of that before in Australia and couldn't believe that journalists didn't stand up and make an outcry over this. How could they have allowed this to happen?

All these things are such a dark spot in human history but I'm glad we've attempted to do something about this with our film—that we can tell children in the future that we attempted to do something about it.

RP: All these are indictable offences under the Geneva Conventions.

EO: Yes, and that's why I made the comment about war criminals.

RP: Where do you think all this is heading?

EO: All I can hope for is that the Democrats don't knock themselves out and whoever wins the primaries—Clinton or Obama—gets into office and takes a stance about torture and other human rights issues and sorts it out in the next 12 months.

RP: Don't you think that's rather naïve?

EO: Yes, I do but I don't want to imagine that things will keep getting worse than what they already are. You've got a Supreme Court that is completely rightwing; you've got an attorney general who won't stop the use of water-boarding;

and you've got this catastrophe in Iraq. People can be taken off under extraordinary rendition, water-boarded and forced to confess to things that can be used by the government to get us involved in another war and another terrible calamity. All this has got to change.

RP: Discovery Channel originally purchased *Taxi to the Dark Side* and then dropped it. Could you explain?

EO: This is another typical story of corporate America. Discovery bought the documentary last year, just after we won the Tribeca Film Festival award in April 2007. We thought they were a pretty unlikely candidate but it was to be screened on their new movie channel, which was supposed to show tough, hard-hitting first-run films.

We asked, "Are you sure that you're going to show this?" They reassured us that they would, but then four or five months ago told us they were not going to screen it. They're a huge corporation and there'd been changes in management and they didn't want to do it. That was that. I think they didn't want anything controversial on their books. This is blatant disrespect for filmmakers and apparently they've done this to others—they buy the work and then shelve it.

We decided not to say anything until the Oscars and when we were nominated we issued a press release and then HBO picked it up.

RP: I contacted SBS television in Australia and they've said they're not going to screen it again.

EO: This is astonishing. You'd think that SBS could make an effort; after all it has won an Oscar and if they generated some press interest and screened it again, it would get good ratings.

RP: Are you working in the US because of lack of opportunities in Australia?

EO: Yes. I think Australians make good movies and I spent 15 years in Australia learning my craft and met lots of talented people but as far as documentaries go the projects are limited and not all that interesting. It's a tough place to work. Television stations like SBS and ABC only have limited slots. The classic example being that they can't even re-screen our movie after it wins an Oscar.

Hopefully I can come back to Australia and do some film festivals with *Taxi* and another movie. The television version is only half the length of the original documentary and with some publicity we might be able to get full houses with good Q&As and spark some controversy and discussion.



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