55th Sydney Film Festival—Part 3

Noteworthy documentaries—from Australia and Canada

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This is the third in a series of articles on the 2008 Sydney Film Festival. Part 1 *appeared on Tuesday September 16 and* Part 2 *on Wednesday September 17.*

A moving tribute

Peter Norman (1942-2006), an Australian sprinter whose sporting career was cut short following his gesture of political solidarity with medal-winning African-American athletes at the Mexico City Olympic Games in 1968, is the subject of *Salute*, one of the better documentaries at this year's festival.

The lead-up to the Mexico Games occurred in the midst of a series of violent and bitter struggles by working people around the world. The assassination of American civil rights leader Martin Luther King in April 1968 provoked the eruption of ghetto riots in US cities; French workers and students challenged capitalism in the May-June general strike; and in Mexico City the military opened fire on thousands of protesting students in Tlatelolco plaza demanding democratic reform and social justice. Five hundred students were arrested and at least 200 killed, with some investigations putting the death toll as high as 1,000, just 10 days before the Olympic Games opening ceremony.

One year prior to the Games, an American civil rights organisation—the Olympic Project for Human Rights—proposed that African-American athletes who qualified for the international event boycott it in order to highlight ongoing racial oppression in the US. The athletes decided, however, that they would gain more publicity for the civil rights movement by participating, but that each individual should be free to develop their own protest at the Games.

This led to one of the most iconic images in the history of the Olympic Games, when Tommie Smith and John Carlos, the first and third place-getters in the 200-metre sprint, raised their clenched fists during the medal presentation ceremony as the American national anthem was being played. Norman, who came second in the event, stood on the podium wearing an Olympic Project for Human Rights button given to him by one of the athletes just prior to the ceremony, and then publicly defended their protest.

To his credit, *Salute*'s director Matt Norman—Peter Norman's nephew—spends considerable time outlining the historical and political context of the event. Utilising archival footage, interviews and intelligent narration, he makes clear that the heroic actions of the three athletes were not accidental, but an organic part of an international movement against racism and for democratic rights.

A couple of local film reviewers have superficially criticised *Salute*, claiming that the documentary is too long. Matt Norman, however, explained in one media interview that he wanted to "push the archival footage to the max to show younger people what it was like" and to "promote civil rights issues".

Salute, for example, details the Tlatelolco massacre in October, 1968 when Mexican authorities shot student demonstrators, an event that was hidden from the athletes and the international media at the time. In addition, the movie explains the social and political tensions in Australia in order to provide some background to Norman's actions.

Importantly, Matt Norman was able to bring the three athletes together before the cameras to tell their story. The two black athletes had previously given slightly different versions about the 200-metre race, with Carlos claiming that he let Smith win the event. Fortunately the interview was held not long before Norman's untimely death from a heart attack in 2006 (see: "Obituary: Australian athlete supported American civil rights struggle").

And what a remarkable and inspiring story it is. Smith and Carlos consulted with Peter Norman before the medals ceremony, in case he might have felt that they were spoiling his moment of glory. Norman immediately agreed with their proposed protest, and decided to wear the Olympic Project for Human Rights badge in solidarity. While the rest is history, the subsequent events and how the protest ruined the sporting careers of all three athletes are not well known.

Prior to and during the Mexico Games, US sporting authorities repeatedly threatened African-American athletes that any form of protest would lead to instant dismissal from the Olympic team. There were anonymous death threats and a rumour circulated that there was a sniper in Mexico City's main stadium prepared to shoot any African-American athlete who dared stage a protest. The three athletes, therefore, had real reason to fear for their lives.

After the ceremony, Smith and Carlos were immediately expelled from the Games by the US authorities and both lost their jobs; Smith's mother died from a heart attack in 1970 when local farmers sent her manure and dead rats in protest against her son's actions; and Carlos's wife committed suicide.

Likewise Norman, who qualified for the next Olympic Games in Munich in 1972, was excluded by Australian Olympic officials. The Australian selectors were so eager to punish Norman over his participation in the 1968 protest that they decided against sending any Australian sprinters at all, in order to prevent him from competing. Norman's sprint times were fast enough for him to qualify for both the 100 and 200-metre events in Munich. In fact, his Mexico City 200-metre sprint was gold medal winning time at the Sydney Olympic Games in 2000. So trenchant was the vendetta by Australian sporting officials against Norman that they

refused to even invite him to the 2000 event.

Peter Norman comes across in the documentary as a warm and remarkably modest man, with no sense of regret or bitterness over his appalling treatment by Australian sporting officials. His sense of humour is infectious and on camera he constantly downplays his role in the protest, simply emphasising that he felt privileged to be part of the historic protest. *Salute* is a fitting tribute to Norman's humanity and an important reminder that there was a time when champion athletes courageously spoke out in defence of democratic rights and in defiance of their national governments.

Life after jail

Mad Morro, directed by Kelrick Martin, is a 52-minute Australian film about the efforts of James Morris, a 30-year-old Aboriginal man, to reestablish a normal existence after spending 13 years in a New South Wales jail.

The film uses the "fly on the wall" documentary technique, with little or no narration. It records Morris's last weeks in prison and his day-to-day activities on return to Taree, a regional NSW town, where his mother Debbie has been eagerly awaiting his release.

Debbie Morris is anxious about whether her son, who has spent his entire adult life in prison, will be able cope in the outside world. The first few weeks of freedom seem fine, with "Morro" settling in, happy to be finally free and with his family. But beneath the surface there is an ever-present sense of impending disaster, reflected, in particular, in his mother's increasingly worried face. There is no full-time work for the young man or any social assistance from state authorities to help him reestablish a stable existence.

Problems begin to emerge when Morro is told by a government agency that he is not entitled to work until he has been unemployed for a certain period of time. Disillusioned, he starts drinking heavily. His mother remarks that she's concerned about the fact that alcohol makes him "so happy". Morro, however, is descending into despair, spending most of his days in a drunken stupor. After the police raid his girlfriend's home and mistreat her, he becomes enraged and starts losing all control. Not too long after, he is arrested on robbery charges and sentenced to another jail term.

Filmmaker Kelrick Martin told one interviewer that he "didn't want to make the movie about black or white, but a person" and "what life is really like for this family". Martin has succeeded in doing that, but that's as far as it goes.

Mad Morro is limited because it fails to place the young man's plight in a wider context or make any broader generalisations about the treatment of Aboriginal people, who comprise the highest proportion of any single group incarcerated in Australian prisons and the overwhelming majority of those who die in custody.

Herein lies one of the limitations of the so-called "fly on the wall" technique. By just letting events run their 'natural' course, and not providing any context, the filmmaker runs the risk that his audience is no more sensitised to the young man's predicament, or enlightened, at the end of the film than it was at the beginning.

Martin told the same interviewer that he didn't make *Mad Morro* "for audiences outside Australia". Why not? Shouldn't a film like this strive to reach the widest possible audience? Unfortunately, while the material is powerful, Martin's approach is too narrow and limited.

The human toll of China's Three Gorges Dam

Up the Yangtze, directed by 30-year-old Canadian director Yung Chang, is a compelling documentary about the Three Gorges project, a massive Chinese dam almost 2.5 kilometres wide and over 180 metres high across the Yangtze River. When the dam is finally completed next year it will house the world's largest hydro-electricity facility.

Initially proposed by Sun Yat-sen in 1919, the grand plan languished until it was backed by Mao Zedong in the early 1950s. However, the controversial and ecologically dangerous project was not approved by the Stalinist regime until 1992, because of opposition by various local engineers and some sections of the ruling Chinese Communist Party. Construction commenced in December 1994. An estimated two million have already been dislocated by the dam—city dwellers and peasants alike. In fact, Yung's grand-parents were originally from one of the now flooded towns.

Yung's movie occupies itself with two young people—Chen Bo Yu and 16-year-old peasant girl Yu Shui—and in the process highlights some of the extraordinary social contradictions now emerging in China. The two teenagers are employed on Farewell Cruises, a fleet of luxury ships that ply the Yangtze carrying American and European tourists.

Yung's intimate low-key approach—the level of trust achieved with Yu Shui and her family is extraordinary—combined with sensitive editing by Hannele Halm and striking cinematography by Wang Shi Qing ensures that the documentary has both emotional depth and strong visuals.

Yu Shui and her parents are displaced peasants who live in a rudimentary shack on the banks of the ever-rising Yangtze, where they eke out an existence growing vegetables. The family, of course, is unable to maintain Yu Shui's education and she is sent to work on the luxury tourist boat. Her tearful departure from the family to the strange and unfamiliar world of the luxury cruise-ship is heart-wrenching. Ship managers rename her Cindy and she is consigned to menial kitchen duties and a never-ending pile of dirty dishes to wash. Homesick and often in tears, the young girl has difficulties adjusting to this new world and is often teased by her fellow workers for her dark skin and peasant background.

Chen Bo Yu, the other key character, is a self-confident young man and obviously from a better-off family. Ambitious and with a rudimentary grasp of English, he works as a bar-tender on the ship.

We witness how he and the other employees involved in face-to-face contact with passengers are taught shipboard etiquette and how to get tips. The trainer tells them never to discuss political and religious issues with international passengers, compare Canada to the United States, talk about royalty or British-Ireland relations, or ever call anyone "old, pale or fat."

Later Jerry, as Chen is now called, cockily tells the camera that he never wastes time with elderly passengers because they are generally poorer and don't give large tips. He becomes, however, too self-confident and is eventually dismissed by the ship management after complaints from some passengers that he is soliciting tips.

The rising Yangtze dominates everything. There is striking footage of expanding river cities with their huge neon-advertising billboards and other ostentatious signs of rapid growth, counter-posed against the difficult struggle for survival by Cindy's parents. One of the documentary's more memorable images is an extended shot of Cindy's father carrying the remains of the family shack up the side of the riverbank, presumably in search of a new place to re-establish the rudimentary dwelling.

Interestingly Yung's documentary provides a glimpse of mounting social tensions between local villagers and corrupt Communist Party

officials. A small shopkeeper, displaced from another town, denounces local party bureaucrats as thugs and breaks down in tears. Meanwhile, outside his small shop, villagers angrily berate a CP bureaucrat over unequal distribution of relocation compensation payments.

Up the Yangtze is not the first film to deal with the massive Three Gorges dam. In fact, as Yung explained to the WSWS, the subject has almost become a sub-genre in its own right. While *Still Life* (2006), a docu-drama by Chinese filmmaker Jia Zhangke, is probably better known internationally, Yung's eloquent film is a valuable contribution.