

An interview with Tony Krawitz, director of *The Tall Man*

“It is an important story about justice in this country”

Mike Head
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Tony Krawitz spoke to the WSWs about The Tall Man, his first full-length documentary. A South African-born writer, he previously directed the short feature Jewboy, about a Chassidic taxi driver in Australia experiencing a crisis of faith. The Tall Man was produced by Darren Dale of Blackfella Films, and based on the book of the same title by Chloe Hooper.

MH: Why were you drawn to this case?

TK: It was mainly after reading Chloe Hooper's book. Not only was it a gripping story. There were so many layers to unpack. It wasn't just a racist cop attacking an Aborigine. It was a policeman who had been working in indigenous communities for 20 years. Cameron Doomadgee was arrested because he was swearing at an indigenous copper, Lloyd Bangaroo. The more I learnt about it, the more there was to explain, such as the history of Palm Island. I thought it was not only an important story about justice in this country and the state of indigenous-white relations, but could also make a broader statement about the history of white settlement, and the relations between indigenous people and cops. We needed to go broader than just the case itself. It was fascinating. I became obsessed with it.

MH: What is that broader significance? Why has this case turned out to be so revealing?

TK: Just going from the last coroner's findings, there was really clear evidence of collusion between the police in the investigation. There have been so many deaths in custody over the years. A few people said to me that if the roles had been reversed, and when they fell through that doorway, Doomadgee had been the one who stood up, and Hurley had been left unconscious and dying, Doomadgee would have been in a jail cell straight away. So the wider significance of the case is that it raises very difficult

questions about justice and power.

Broader than that, this raises issues of indigenous communities that are quite remote and don't have much employment in them. We met such great people but with high unemployment, not having something to focus on in your life is a difficult thing. It can lead to apathy and giving up on life.

MH: What does the Doomadgee case reveal about the role of the police and the legal system?

TK: I sat through the last inquest and it was the first time I had been in a courtroom watching the case. I don't have a legal background, but from a lay perspective, from speaking to Palm Islanders, and from doing research, Aboriginal witnesses are prejudiced against by the way the justice system works. Roy Bramwell was the main witness but he wasn't called in the manslaughter trial. He would have been rubbished because he was in the police station for quite a heinous act, the bashing of three women, but that doesn't negate the truth of what he saw.

MH: To my mind, the decision not to call Roy Bramwell flowed from the state government's Street Review, which decided to go to trial on a completely different basis than the first coroner's findings. Do you have any thoughts about the decision not to call Bramwell?

TK: From my reading of the case, I disagree strongly with the decision. It's easy with the benefit of hindsight. Who knows what would have happened if Roy Bramwell had taken the stand. He was in prison at the time. There were lots of issues. To have an Aboriginal prisoner on the stand, who had bashed three women, it would have been really hard to get the jury to believe Roy Bramwell. But he was the one witness who saw what happened. It was difficult to see how Doomadgee's liver could have been cleaved in two just from a fall.

MH: Do you have any comment on what this case reveals about the role of the Labor government in Queensland? It backed the police from the outset, declared an emergency on the island and then organised the Street Review, which ended up recommending a trial on a completely flawed basis.

TK: I don't know enough about the Labor Party through that process. It just seems that everyone was just playing politics with the case, where a man had died. A lot of the players in this case, including the Labor Party and the police force, have things to answer for. The approach we took was to lay out the case for the audience as clearly as possible. We were also hoping that people like politicians, lawyers, activists and mayors and whoever is involved on the ground in Queensland can set up things so that it doesn't happen again. Maybe that's a bit Pollyanna-ish. There's a lot of cynicism involved. Everyone was just probably just trying to protect their own hide.

MH: In one interview you spoke of Hurley being a flawed human being, and said we are all flawed human beings. Don't you think that this is a member of the police force, carrying out a definite role and task?

TK: When I say flawed human beings, I don't mean that we are all capable of arresting someone and ending up with them as dead. I am not trying to excuse Hurley and I'm not trying to defend what happened in that police station, at least from my reading of the facts. But I suppose a lot of people on both sides judge Hurley just from what happened on that day. I've heard reports of a lot of good things that he did, like organising sports trips for kids. The coroner found him responsible for the death of Cameron Doomadgee and he has to live with that for the rest of his life. It's a completely tragic event.

MH: In another interview, you said the facts were murky. In the first coroner's report, which went for 35 pages, the facts weren't murky. She found that Hurley had caused Doomadgee's death by bashing him and then leaving him in a cell to die.

TK: I was referring to the second coroner's report, which found that the investigation had been so flawed that it was impossible to determine exactly what had happened. In a legal sense, the facts are murky because the facts have been messed with. There was collusion between the police officers. The last coroner said Hurley was responsible for the death but he couldn't say if it was manslaughter or just a fall, or whether Hurley bashed Doomadgee. My personal view is that the facts aren't murky, just legally speaking.

We went as far as we could go, especially in terms of defamation. We were going with just what the coroner said, and I think it's pretty damning what the last coroner said. We actually were able to go further than we expected. A couple of people in the film call Hurley a murderer, and the lawyers said we could keep that, as expressions of their own opinions.

It's quite interesting, as with the book, to lay out the facts as legally known, and ask the audience to make up their own minds, like as jury. Looking at the twitter comments, people aren't saying that the facts are murky.

MH: What has been the response to the film? Australia's treatment of indigenous people is a major issue globally, so has that been reflected in the response?

TK: There have been quite a few film festivals internationally and there have been sold out screenings, so it's got a strong response. Hopefully it will get onto TV overseas. It got a film release in Australia, but that was only quite small, just for a couple of weeks. Only now that it's been shown on SBS and a quarter of a million people saw it, I've been getting feedback. SBS sent me a lot of stuff on twitter, which has been very interesting.

MH: What shone through in the film was the families—their dignity, strength, determination, and also their sorrow. This was one of the strongest features of the film. What struck you about the loved ones who were affected by Doomadgee's death?

TK: They were incredible. They really wanted this film to be made. It really struck me. They had been sitting in court for over six years, just hearing their brother spoken about as a dead person, or as a drunk, swearing Aborigine who had died in a police station. They were really happy to talk about their family and him as a brother, a father and a human being who lived a rich life. They found it quite cathartic. They had been in the media a lot, but just as sound bites.

I was struck, as you say, by their dignity and warmth. One of the best things about working on this film was getting to know the Doomadgee family.



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