

“Cinema must have a social conscience”

Veteran filmmaker Paul Cox discusses his latest feature

Richard Phillips
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Over the past three months film director Paul Cox has been appearing at special screenings throughout Australia of Force of Destiny, his first dramatic feature in seven years (see review). The semi-autobiographical work was inspired by Cox's ongoing struggle with liver cancer. The Dutch-born, Australian-based writer and director, was diagnosed in early 2009 with the disease and received a liver transplant late that year.

Cox, 75, spoke at length with the World Socialist Web Site during a recent visit to Sydney. In this edited interview he discusses the background and nature of his new film, his artistic approach, concerns about militarism and the commercial and cultural pressures on contemporary filmmakers.

Richard Phillips: Could you begin by explaining why you decided to make *Force of Destiny*?

Paul Cox: Having a liver transplant was an extraordinary experience and one that was too amazing to let go. I have a quite rare blood group and for a while it looked like I wouldn't survive. I waited for seven and a half months, slowly going down the drain, and then on Christmas Day, during Christmas dinner, I received a phone call and was told that there was a donor. It was only a few weeks before I was supposed to die.

I wrote *Tales from the Cancer Ward*, which somebody read when I was at Cannes about a year later and they said I had to make the film. I began writing a script but couldn't get any finance for the film. Someone having a transplant is not exactly regarded as hot material by the bean-counters.

We collected some money and then received financial support from someone in India. This meant that Screen Australia could not refuse me anymore and they provided some money and off we went. Once it was complete we tried to get Roadshow involved but they weren't interested. They didn't regard it as a commercial film. We were then invited to open the Melbourne International Film Festival and since then it has been gathering momentum.

We've been travelling to all the screenings and doing Q&As, which is a bit exhausting but there seems to be a lot of satisfied customers. It's a bit of an odd-ball film but the audience reaction is strong and that pleases me. We hope a distributor will come forward and run it in the cinemas for a while.

The film has a fantastic cast and has all the hallucinations and the madness that comes with cancer treatment. It is also a love story and it nourishes. We believe that there's an audience for this

and hopefully it will encourage more organ donations and therefore help to save lives.

RP: Was it painful re-living some of these experiences?

PC: No. I was too determined. Nobody thought I'd finish the film; that I'd die in the midst of it. But even in India, with temperatures of up to 50 degrees, I just kept on going; I was obsessed. It was a wonderful experience and one that kept me alive.

Unfortunately the cancer has come back and has now infected the transplanted liver. All the chemo business has stopped and apparently there's nothing anyone can do. I should have died many times but I'm still alive, have managed to make a film and shared it with others, and that gives me great satisfaction.

I've been told to take things easy and just relax have a good time before I die but I'm just not the type for that. You somehow get used to living on the edge of the void.

RP: How did living on the edge of the void, as you say, influence your artistic approach?

PC: I felt very free making this movie. Music and film are similar mediums and I think we should be making movies with this understanding in mind. *Force of Destiny* flashes back and forth to India several times without any establishing shots of airports or airplanes. Normally I wouldn't have done it this way but since the transplant I've lost my fears about the things that can go wrong when you're involved in the filmmaking process.

RP: I thought the scenes in public hospital wards were particularly moving.

PC: I'm not insured—I don't believe in it—and so I had the fortunate experience of being with people in the public wards. What you see in the film happened in my ward. There was the Russian man who came and sang for his wife and put flowers on her bed, and the painter who came with a picture of a flower. It still breaks my heart to remember the mother who insisted on putting on make-up because she didn't want her child to see or remember her suffering. She died the next day.

Hospitals are astonishing places. Suddenly you're in an environment where extraordinary people are doing everything they can to help you. This is far different from a world dominated by taking things from people.

Although the public health system is crumbling in Australia I was given incredible treatment. My partner Rosie, who also has a

transplant, was insured and she got exactly the same treatment. If I'd been living in America I wouldn't have survived.

The government is doing insane things. Budgets and jobs are being cut from public health while millions are being spent on military aircraft and war equipment. We also have this constant celebration of war. I can't even stand hearing the word Gallipoli anymore.

I came from a war zone in Europe and the first five years of my life was war and destruction. We never knew whether our house would be standing or not. The smell of death was everywhere.

On May 5 each year in my little town in Holland the people walk silently through the streets commemorating the fact that at least half the population of the town perished during the war. There's no brass bands or flags just an immense sadness. But here in Australia we have this nonsensical celebration of war and you can't escape it.

RP: This is to condition the population, and particularly young people, for new wars.

PC: That's right. The national war memorial in Canberra is obscene. It has spaces reserved for the names of the next lot of war dead and even multi-media war experiences for children. And all the politicians are involved in this war mongering. Today there's not an ounce of humanity in any of the official politicians, not just here but everywhere in the world. We seem to be governed by a pack of criminals.

RP: You were recently quoted somewhere saying: "If I could live my life again I'd be crazier, more radical." Do you mean that politically or artistically?

PC: I meant artistically, but it's probably a bit too late now. Perhaps I just want to be forgiven.

RP: What for?

PC: I'm not sure. Perhaps I'd like to try and mend things a little with the people I might have offended. I don't want to leave behind all sorts of unfinished issues. But if I was younger I'd like to be more radical artistically, as well as being more politically involved. I was quite shy—didn't really know what the hell was going on—and it took me a long time before I found my own voice.

Most of the films we made in the early days came out of sheer tenacity, madness and a total lack of what was considered the normal approach. We were determined though to show the humanity in all of us. As Anne Frank said at the end of her diary, "You have to keep believing that people are basically good."

We are surrounded today by so much evil and ignorance and it's pretty frightening but I have to remain optimistic and be honest with the feelings inside me.

Every thinking artist aims to create something that is true. Although you can't claim it as "the truth," I always strove for artistic honesty and that meant I never had any interest in compromising with the pressures and demands of the commercial film industry. As soon as I see a film that has the ring of the dollar to it—whether it's about cancer or anything else—I turn off. I make films for fellow dreamers, not bums on seats.

Maybe it's my old Catholic upbringing but I'd feel very guilty if I made something driven by money or profit. There can't be any fooling around with this. I may be a little mad and abstract at times but that's all I have to offer.

Talking about this with you this morning makes me further realise how lucky I was to make the films I did. They probably wouldn't be produced today.

I had many chances to do Hollywood things and out of sheer perversion I agreed, just to find out what it was like. There was *Molokai: The Story of Father Damien* and an IMAX film—*The Hidden Dimension*—but these were unhappy, "never again" experiences. I made enemies of quite a few producers because I refused to listen to them and they butchered the movies.

RP: What advice would you offer to young filmmakers today?

PC: Cinema is now over 100 years old and a powerful gift to humanity but it is now dominated by major commercial interests. This is a problem because films have enormous power and can influence people.

Any filmmaker that thinks and feels is acutely aware of this fact. I can think of ten films that literally changed my life. They crept into my bones and had a very profound influence on my outlook, not just for a few days or weeks but throughout my entire life.

So my advice to any young filmmaker is first understand that you have a social obligation, you must have something of substance to say. Don't become a filmmaker if you're only interested in making money. If it's money you're after, just bugger off. Cinema is too precious for that and it must have a social conscience.

This was always at the back of our minds when we made our movies, irrespective of whether they were commercially successful or not. That is why the best of the films we made still endure. People should be given something that enriches them. They should leave the cinema with thinking more deeply, more sensitised, instead of feeling empty and numbed, as is usually the case today.



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