THINK BIG
Making documentaries for the big screen
Filmmakers who have produced a feature documentary will have grappled with the thorny question of what makes the project suitable for the big screen. What is it about the story and the way it is told that interests someone enough to buy a ticket to watch it in a cinema or program it at a major film festival?

In order to build an appetite for feature documentaries, audiences need to trust that they will deliver a satisfying cinema experience, the same kind of experience they have come to expect from great narrative dramas. First and foremost feature documentaries need to tell stories that touch and inspire the audience in some way. Like good fiction, the style and the content should work together. Hand-in-hand with this is the necessity for a good business structure to give the project the best foundation possible from which to manage the ambitions of the film.

To add to the ongoing exchange of ideas about the creative and commercial challenges of documentaries for the big screen, Screen Australia ran the first Think Big Documentary Lab and Masterclass in November 2012.

The one-day masterclass followed a week-long lab where six creative teams were invited to explore the cinematic potential of their projects over four days. Led by Oscar®-winning producer Simon Chinn, a number of prominent Australian documentary directors, and industry decision makers, the lab and masterclass explored the demands of making a successful big-screen documentary.

To continue the discussion we have compiled this publication. We hope it adds to your understanding of what it takes to give your documentary a shot at the big screen.

**CREDITS**

Special thanks to Sandy George for providing the interview and report text and to Annabel Osborne for producing and editing the video interviews featured in this booklet.

**RESIDENTIAL THINK BIG LAB PARTICIPANTS, NOVEMBER 2012**

Photo: Paul Elliott
At their best, feature documentaries inspire

SIMON CHINN TALKS ABOUT MAKING DOCUMENTARIES FOR THE BIG SCREEN.

Sandy George reports

“Often the stories that work are the ones that offer genuine uplift, a feel-good factor, something inspirational,” says UK-based producer Simon Chinn. He’s talking about the kinds of stories that can act as the bedrock on which big-screen documentaries can be built.

“Yes, ‘inspirational’ is a good word. I often think that, at their best, feature documentaries inspire much better than the best work of fiction because of their veracity and truthfulness. You can touch and feel them in a way that you often can’t with fiction. And often it’s about subtext.”

“Talking heads are often rather maligned,” he continues, “yet it’s in the whites of the eyes of the interviewees, or in their tears or their demeanor, that truth is often laid bare in all its complexity.” Thinking about the interviews with French high wire artist Philippe Petit and his childhood friend Jean-Louis Blondeau in The Man on Wire, and with Frédéric Bourdin in The Imposter, the comment feels revelatory in terms of understanding the power of Chinn’s work. All his films dig deeply into the human psyche.

“Documentary can deliver character in extremely subtle and sophisticated ways,” he says. “And with economy.”

He recalls feeling worried after recording the interview with Petit because the footage played like a performance that the high wire artist had been rehearsing for the 30 years since he illegally walked across a wire strung between New York’s Twin Towers. But in the end, alongside the other interviews, the drama of the re-enactments and the archival footage, that interview actually revealed very clearly that Petit was, above all else, a performer.

“The other thing I look for in a documentary is narrative… I don’t see documentaries as necessarily different from any other genre of filmmaking. For me they do the same job as fiction, often just better in my view, particularly when it comes to telling stories that you probably wouldn’t believe if they were dramatised.”

He believes that people who don’t ‘get’ documentaries or haven’t seen many, fail to understand that they are just storytelling. Many of these same people think that documentary is “good medicine” or is intent on delivering a message and changing the world.

“Your films have to be greater than the sum of their parts.”

“There are great examples of documentaries that are agents of change – An Inconvenient Truth, for example, and the polemics of Michael Moore – but that’s not the sort of work I’m interested in making. Everyone making feature docs has to figure out what they want to do.”

Chinn’s background is in television journalism and research. He describes himself as having “an abiding journalistic curiosity”, perhaps accounting for why his stories have plenty of delicious dimension.

While it sounds like a truism, Chinn makes the point that the only determinant behind whether a documentary makes it into cinemas is if a distributor believes they can get bums on seats. While this notion could be applied widely, documentaries are inherently difficult to market because they don’t have many of the elements – principally stars – that distributors can use to sell fictional films.

When discussing the release, Chinn talks about the importance of Searching for Sugar Man transcending its label as a ‘music documentary’ – which is a niche within a niche with a somewhat patchy track record of box office success. But at its heart, of course, Sugar Man is also a great human story about hope and integrity; Rodriguez prompts audiences to ponder what really constitutes richness of life in a culture where celebrity is lauded and encouraged. In other words, as with all good documentaries, there is a bigger truth at its heart and it’s not just a music doc.

“If I had a message I wanted to give to aspiring theatrical documentary makers it is that your films have to be greater than the sum of their parts. It’s not enough just to tell a story well; they also have to expose something bigger, to resonate with something that’s in the air.”

Chinn believes that, for his kind of documentary, it’s important that a filmmaker knows from the outset that they are making something for the big screen, not least because they require more production resources than, say, a one-hour television documentary. (This is why it can be extremely difficult to finance observational documentaries for the big screen; unless the filmmaker has a very strong track record, such as a Steve James or a Nick Broomfield, distributors are wary about
promising a release because no-one knows how the story will end. Consequently, low-cost digital technology has been a boon.

SO WHAT ARE HIS KIND OF DOCUMENTARIES?

He describes many of the stories he’s done as “ready made” – “little footnotes in history that I’ve been lucky to come across” – because they have happened and can be “excavated”.

He is too modest to say this himself, but there is also a sheer artistry to his films, and a cleverness of construction, that helps to make them compelling. Every aspect of production technique, from the cinematographic style to the music to the pace, adds to the intrigue and pushes the narrative forward. Often there’s also a lot of humour.

“As with any documentary, you can’t rush it, but this applies more so because the bar has to be set that much higher if they’re being shown on the big screen.”

The filming of Project Nim was quite straightforward, but challenges in the editing room pushed the schedule from 16 to 26 weeks.

“There were a lot of characters to choose from and we had to decide whose point of view the story was being told from. There were big complicated scientific ideas that had to be made simple, and big philosophical ideas that you didn’t want to spell out but did want to make available. Also, there was no obvious end: we didn’t want an ending in which the chimp dies and that’s it, you had to find an ending that wasn’t unremittingly bleak, that offered some hope and redemption.”

Perhaps even an ending that is inspiring.
Learning lessons by unpacking Florence

“STORY, STRUCTURE AND VISUAL STYLE ARE THE KEY COMPONENTS OF DOCUMENTARY, JUST AS THEY ARE WITH DRAMA,” SAYS DIRECTOR GILLIAN ARMSTRONG.

Sandy George reports

“The feature documentary has to dazzle with bravery and originality. People will go out and buy a ticket if the story is unique and captures their imagination but, most importantly, the film has to engage in a very human way with compelling characters that move us. It is the small detailed human truths that can tell the big story.”

So says Gillian Armstrong, who has had more success in Hollywood than most of Australia’s feature film directors, and also has a rich history of documentary making that includes Unfolding Florence: The Many Lives of Florence Broadhurst and a biographical series that has tracked three Adelaide friends since they were teenagers, with the most recent instalment being Love, Lust & Lies.

During the Think Big masterclass in Sydney in November 2012, Armstrong emphasised that story, structure and visual style are the key components of documentary, just as they are of drama.

She says that unless cinema is different to what’s on TV, the audience won’t invest their time and money. She suggests filmmakers ask themselves a series of questions to ascertain whether their story can sustain a feature-length documentary: “What is the story? What are you saying? What points are you making? Why? Is it worth it? Is it compelling and unique? Does it matter? Is it rich enough, complicated enough, involving enough to be feature-length? Why this story? Why do you care about it? If you don’t have a passion for it, will we (the audience)? What makes it different and special? What is the hook? Why the big screen? Is it powerful, visual, original, unexpected, arresting and sexy? Will it be a transformative experience? An event?”

It is through clever structuring that a story becomes more involving and powerful, she continued. Just telling the story chronologically is dull and has no tension. There’s got to be risk and a central question to hook in an audience and make them want to know the outcome. That’s what makes a film compelling.

“The key is how you begin the story, the set up,” says Armstrong. “The story has to grab the audience and keep them in its spell from beginning to end and it should be doing that by triggering a crisis or a question, or by putting something at stake to interest them in taking the journey.

“In drama theory, effective screenplays have three basic acts: you introduce a character with a problem, you complicate the problem, then you resolve the problem. That’s the basis of dramatic tension and they advise there should also be a twist or turn every 15 minutes. You should think of risk, jeopardy, emotion, suspense, conflicts, surprises and reveals. Don’t give everything away up front and every scene must push the story forward towards a climax.”

Armstrong illustrated her points with her 2006 documentary about the designer Florence Broadhurst. There were many intriguing aspects to this woman’s life and personality, including her murder in 1977, which automatically gave the project a strong hook.

“The premise of Unfolding Florence was that you (the audience) would believe that by the end of the film we would have solved the murder and we did try, but there were six suspects – which says a lot about Florence,” says Armstrong dryly.

After painstaking research it was decided to stylishly re-enact one story that encapsulated Broadhurst’s spirit: breaking the rules at a black and white ball by wearing a red dress. This gave the audience a visual motif for Broadhurst’s quest for glamour and acclaim, while also setting the tone of 1970s wealth. (That said, Armstrong warned her audience to be very wary of re-enactments, especially those made cheaply.)

After producer Sue Clothier offered the project to Armstrong, the director suggested involving dramatist Katherine Thomson who subsequently developed a habit of acting out Broadhurst’s behaviour. This sparked the idea of having the character tell the story herself, with her characteristic confidence and cheekiness.

In a recurring scene Broadhurst (Judi Farr) walks to work on the day of her murder. The angle of the camera makes the audience feel like they are walking just behind her, getting closer and closer to the scene of the violent crime. This very effectively adds to the tension and intrigue.

“A good way to test the central dramatic question is to use the word ‘will,’” says Armstrong. “Will Dorothy make it back to Kansas? Will they kill the shark that’s killing all the people? Will we discover who killed Florence and why and how she died? Then ask: Is there rising jeopardy? Is there, finally, closure?”

Armstrong emphasises that stylistic choices must not be imposed but must flow from and be as one with the story and the material. They also should not be predictable, formulaic or mediocre. In Unfolding Florence the choices made reinforce the drama, the tone and the nature of the title character.

Broadhurst boldly lied about her accomplishments, the research showed, and this prompted the use of animation to point this out in a playful way. All the interviews were also beautifully stylised, with the background showing off Broadhurst’s very fashionable – then and now – wallpaper designs.

UNFOLDING FLORENCE: THE MANY LIVES OF FLORENCE BROADHURST

Photo: Anne Zahalka.

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“‘There’s got to be risk and a central question to hook in an audience and make them want to know the outcome. That’s what makes a film compelling’.”
One thing that took Armstrong by surprise was how much Broadhurst’s staff loved their former boss. A documentary maker has to be ready to incorporate the unexpected, she says, and the emotional way in which they spoke of her after so many years, became a focus of the film. So did their love of working with her on design.

“Being in the cutting room is a really important time,” says Armstrong. “That’s when you are crafting, reshaping and focusing the story, and using music… but, in the end, the ability to dramatise comes from being daring. It’s about risk and courage. The best stories have excitement, surprise, fulfilment, honesty, emotional truths, honesty, insight, power, magic, innovation and integrity.”

According to Armstrong, “A feature documentary can be of any style, it could be a very simple observational piece as long as it engages us emotionally and takes us on a journey… a small story can be big.”

“Docs for the big screen are a completely different thing; it’s a very different story to have someone get a babysitter, pay for parking, buy popcorn, etc etc. Your idea needs to prise someone off his or her computer/Netflix/TV and into the cinema. For me, you need a great story told using the right (and, if possible, entirely new) tools in the filmmaking box.”

“A lot of filmmakers go in thinking they have a big-screen documentary when maybe they don’t. The big-screen doc needs something additional on top of a great story – it might be incredible cinematography, immersive sound or some experimentation with form. Sitting in a darkened cinema, the audience can be transported, and good big-screen work recognises this. The pacing is also totally different. I think you’re allowed to make your audience wait a little more on the big screen! As long as there’s a payoff of course.”

“People who buy, program, fund and make documentaries provide some insights.”

Claire Gandy, Programming Manager, Dendy Cinemas

“Cinema-going is changing, documentaries can be the total movie experience. Real characters. Unbelievable truths. Passion. Inspiration. Action.”

Matthew Bate, director of Shut Up Little Man! An Audio Misadventure and Stunt Love

“Big-screen documentaries do one of two things. Either there is a real sense of shock or surprise, something thrilling or confusing, like there would be in the best works of fiction. Or they are very affecting because there is a strong sense of social justice about them; they are films that will help create a better world.”

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“The common ingredient in most great documentaries is discovery. It might be in the story or the way the story is told, after all, every documentary is a bit manipulative.”

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Nashen Moodley, Director, Sydney Film Festival
Sandy George reports

Observational documentaries depend on unscripted, uncontrolled reality unfolding and veteran Bob Connolly says there are no short cuts when filming them, especially where the filmmaker has big-screen aspirations.

“If you’re looking for a narrative, which is so crucial in theatrical documentaries... the longer you film the more chance you’ve got of a narrative emerging and, more importantly, some kind of dramatically satisfying dénouement,” he says.

This particularly applies to filmmakers who want to show what happens on screen, rather than resorting to voiceover narration to hide gaps in the story.

Connolly and Sophie Raymond together directed Mrs Carey’s Concert and they were on hand, cameras in hand, for eight hours a day, five days a week, for 18 months. This dedication paid off because, after a 17-week run in cinemas in 2011, it became Australia’s second-highest grossing local documentary of all time (excluding IMAX films) and subsequently won Best Feature-length Documentary and Best Direction in a Documentary at the inaugural AACTA Awards.

At the time cameras first roll on observational documentaries, it is impossible to know how the narrative will develop, and therefore very difficult to know if they deserve to be seen on

BOB CONNOLLY AND SOPHIE RAYMOND, THE DIRECTORS OF MRS CAREY’S CONCERT, DISCUSSED THE ART OF MAKING OBSERVATIONAL DOCUMENTARY FOR THEATRICAL RELEASE AT THE THINK BIG MASTERCLASS HELD BY SCREEN AUSTRALIA IN NOVEMBER 2012.

Be novelists, not polemicists
the big screen. Despite its success, Mrs Carey’s Concert is a case in point.

The film tells the story of Sydney music teacher Karen Carey’s recurring 18-month task of coaxing and cajoling the students of MLC Burwood into putting on a biennial concert at the Sydney Opera House. But it started life as a straightforward DVD record of the 2007 concert for the school. Prompted by the emotional resonance of the material, the filmmakers decided that going behind the scenes in the lead-up to the 2009 concert could make a good observational documentary. They subsequently got the backing of ABC TV and Screen Australia for a one-hour project.

Two-and-a-half years later – after crafting the film for a year in the editing room – they showed a two-hour version to representatives of the broadcaster and the government agency, confessing that they were having trouble cutting it down. Buzied by the response they contacted the then director of the Adelaide Film Festival (AFF), Katrina Sedgwick, about the possibility of getting the finance to make a feature-length version.

Nevertheless, they did not seriously entertain the notion of having a theatrical season until Sedgwick called and told them – much later – that she wanted to make Mrs Carey’s Concert the opening night film. The response on the night sealed its fate as a cinematic release.

Mrs Carey’s Concert begins with Doretta Balkizas on stage at the Sydney Opera House. The shot, held for a long time, shows the 16-year-old waiting to perform the second movement of the Brahms Violin Concerto at the 2007 concert. Filmed by cinematographer Bonnie Elliott, it was this scene that inspired the filmmakers to go behind the scenes to document preparations for the 2009 concert.

“If you’re looking for a narrative, which is so crucial in theatrical documentaries... the longer you film the more chance you’ve got of a narrative emerging and, more importantly, some kind of dramatically satisfying dénouement.” Bob Connolly

“We kept crying every time we watched it in the edit because it had that cinematic moment... when you get to be on stage with her and experience that moment, that instant transformation when she puts the violin up to her cheek and ceases to be a school girl,” says Raymond.

In the finished film, a woman’s voice, later revealed as Carey’s, has been added to the visuals: “I distinctly remember proposing to Doretta that she should play the Brahms Violin Concerto and she looked at me as if to say ‘That’s not possible’. I think she thought she wasn’t ready... She felt she couldn’t do it unless it was perfect. It was very hard to convince her that even if it wasn’t absolutely perfect the most important thing was actually that it was coming from her heart.”

This opening delivered tension and also made it clear that something was at stake, says Connolly, namely the reluctance of the students to cooperate because of the pressure the concert put on them and the possibility that they might fail. The opening also illustrated, from the teachers’ point of view, the bittersweet irony of the long struggle to get the students ready to perform, knowing they would have to start all over again with a new group of students once the concert was over.

Raymond believes that the elements that make great drama also make great theatrical documentaries, and she has adopted two guiding principles from Andrew Stanton, the writer/director of Finding Nemo and writer of Toy Story and Toy Story 2. The first is that a filmmaker has to know the punch line of their film. In the case of Mrs Carey’s Concert, once she and Connolly began editing all the material, starting with the 2009 concert, they knew it would be Emily Sun’s performance of the Bruch Violin Concerto. (It was Emily who performed in person after the world premiere at the Adelaide Festival Centre, giving the screening even more ‘event’ status which, in turn, created buzz that helped spread positive ‘word of mouth’.)

“We got to see all the punch lines, the delivery points; the rest of it was how to deliver those punch lines,” says Raymond. “We could edit out many of the characters we’d been following because they didn’t have a delivery point.”

That said, Iris Shi was always going to be in the film because her blatant refusal to be interested or involved in the forthcoming concert added humour. The fact that she sung during the concert – or at least mouthing the words! – was a thrill for the filmmakers.

“We had to cut her scenes to a miniscule of a second so that the audience would still like her, she was so stubborn; audiences would have slapped her if she was on screen for a fraction more than she needed to be,” says Raymond, laughing.

She also quoted writer and teacher Billy Marshall Stoneking – “The cheapest part of your budget is the audience’s imagination: use it lavishly” – and paid tribute to the talents of editor Nick Meyers, who asked her to cut the film herself: “The delivery points.”

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She also quoted writer and teacher Billy Marshall Stoneking – “The cheapest part of your budget is the audience’s imagination: use it lavishly” – and paid tribute to the talents of editor Nick Meyers, who applied a fresh eye at fine cut stage. Connolly and Raymond distributed the film themselves but would not recommend self-distribution without the help of experienced people. In their case, those people included Glenys Rowe and Kim Lewis.
“The cheapest part of your budget is the audience’s imagination: use it lavishly.” – Billy Marshall Stoneking

“I got sick to death of hearing about films that had been distributed and done extremely well and the cinema owners laughed all the way to the bank, and the distributors laughed all the way to the bank, and the filmmakers got nothing for six months of going around doing thousands of interviews,” says Connolly.

After the reception in Adelaide we decided to distribute it ourselves... What that meant was that we got 40 per cent off the top (once the exhibitors had taken 75 per cent and the release costs of about $100,000 had been paid). It didn’t make it an economic proposition but it was a hell of a lot better than it would have been if we didn’t get that 40 per cent because we would have got nothing, even though this film grossed $1.2 million.”

Later Connolly noted that it is naïve for filmmakers to think that they can make money from a theatrical release, even if they are the distributor, unless the film grosses more than about $5 million. The release, however, provides excellent marketing grunt for when the film becomes available on home entertainment platforms or to the education sector.

As for what to avoid when making observational documentaries for the big screen, according to Connolly its ‘preaching and teaching’, in other words, being a polemicist rather than a novelist. A documentary must not allow ideological intent or the subconscious to manipulate their responsibilities as an observer and storyteller who conveys, as profoundly as possible, the inner workings of the human heart and brain.

Her latest film, Mrs Carey’s Concert, a feature documentary co-directed with Bob Connelly, grossed over $1 million at the Australian box office and won a multitude of awards

BOB CONNOLLY PRODUCER/DIRECTOR
Bob began his career at the ABC where he directed some 30 documentaries. He then teamed up with Robin Anderson to release the Oscar®-nominated First Contact (1983), Joe Leahy’s Neighbours (1989) and Block Harvest (1992). All three films won the Grand Prix at Cinéma du Réel and Best Documentary AFIs. Connolly and Anderson released Rats in the Ranks (1996) and their last film Facing the Music (2001), which also won the Best Documentary AFI. With co-director Sophie Raymond, Mrs Carey’s Concert (2011) was Bob’s sixth major film release.

SOPHIE RAYMOND PRODUCER/DIRECTOR
Sophie has a BA in Anthropology, Drama & Theatre Studies and a Postgraduate Diploma in Animation and Multimedia. She was a founding member of the Southern Ladies Animation Group which made the award-winning short animated documentary, It’s Like That. Sophie was assistant animator on Adam Elliot’s Oscar®-winning short, Harvie Krumpet, and feature, Mary & Max.

“A lot of proposals are one-hour TV commissions and the filmmakers say they want to make them longer, more meditative; but these proposals are rarely something conceived for the big screen, they are extended television documentaries. The ones that leap off the page have a detailed treatment in which a true journey unfolds, and not just a factual journey. The protagonist has a quest – to find out or achieve something – and involves unpeeling layers, overcoming obstacles, moments of great discovery and a strong dramatic structure. These pitches immerse you in a world, and go beyond that world too, by revealing a bigger truth beyond the chronology of the events. Then there are also those documentaries that feature big personalities fronting them and very obviously driving a narrative, but maybe we don’t have those personalities here.”

Mark Woods
Executive Producer
Melbourne International Film Festival Premieres Fund

“Telling it like it is... But the core documentary audience is often very willing to spread the word about theatrical documentaries and that’s highly combustible fuel for social media fires. With this level of word of mouth and expensive celluloid prints no longer required, new opportunities have opened up, including self-distribution.”

Joost den Hartog
Director, Australian International Documentary Conference

“The economics behind Hollywood blockbusters and documentaries are very different. There are few competitive advantages for documentary producers and the opportunities to cash in on auxiliary rights are very limited: the Bowling for Columbine trench coat didn’t sell well and Super Size Me prominently featured at Universal Studios but not in the form of an amusement ride... But the core documentary audience is often very willing to spread the word about theatrical documentaries and that’s highly combustible fuel for social media fires. With this level of word of mouth and expensive celluloid prints no longer required, new opportunities have opened up, including self-distribution.”

Nicolas Whatson
General Manager, Palace Films

“Ask three questions when I’m assessing whether a documentary is worthy of cinematic release. Is this a story capable of being someone’s first choice when they get to the cinema box office? (Especially 35 to 70-year-old women?) Is there someone depicted who I can hold onto as a point of identification or admiration? If what you’re telling me is grim, confronting and/or upsetting, what reason would I seriously have to a) leave the house and b) pay to see the film? And note that famous, inspirational and/or important people sell tickets, most notably when they appear – and talk – at public screenings.”

Richard Moore
Director, Brisbane International Film Festival

“People who buy, program, fund and make documentaries provide some insights”

“Think Big: Making documentaries for the big screen” Screen Australia 2013
Paul Wiegard (BSc, BA) is the Founder and Joint Managing Director of Madman Entertainment. Paul is also the Chairperson of Australian Home Entertainment Distributors Association and has been a Board member for the Melbourne International Film Festival for six years.

Paul executive produced Balibo, My Year Without Sex, Not Quite Hollywood, Save Your Legs! and The Hunter. He has executed the release of nine feature documentaries in Australia and New Zealand including Searching for Sugarman, The Cove and Exit Through the Gift Shop.

Budgets for the big-screen titles ranged from less than $50,000 to over $3 million, with an average of around $700,000 per title and a median of $400,000. The majority of big-screen titles (82 per cent) received development and/or production support from federal or state screen agencies.

Overall production spiked in 2007/08 largely due to an increase in series production. The amalgamation of former federal government agencies also boosted the number of titles with federal funding. Big-screen titles also increased.

No. and budget of big-screen titles also spiked in 2009/10; however, there was no impact on total documentary production. Only three of the 13 titles had a theatrical release.

Big-screen documentaries are feature-length documentaries that had either a commercial cinema release or screened at a key festival or awards event.

**Big-screen documentaries at a glance… production**

**AUSTRALIAN DOCUMENTARY PRODUCTION, 2006/07–2010/11**

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<th>PRODUCTION YEAR</th>
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<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
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<td><strong>974</strong></td>
<td><strong>37</strong></td>
<td><strong>579</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Average</strong></td>
<td><strong>10</strong></td>
<td><strong>185</strong></td>
<td><strong>7</strong></td>
<td><strong>116</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Screen Australia

Note: Figures may differ to previous published data.
On making advocacy films by stealth

A TINY GROUP OF PEOPLE WERE ALSO PRIVILEGED TO HEAR FROM FORBIDDEN LIES DIRECTOR ANNA BROINOWSKI AND SEE SOME RAW FOOTAGE FROM HER NEXT SURE-TO-BE-GROUNDBREAKING FILM AIM HIGH IN CREATION!

Sandy George reports.

Anna Broinowski describes her 2007 film Forbidden Lies as “an advocacy film by stealth”. By telling the story of Norma Khouri, who wrote a book about an honour killing that purported to be true when it wasn’t, the filmmaker wanted audiences to question what they should and shouldn’t believe.

What made Broinowski so passionate about the idea was George W Bush’s ‘grand con’ that there was a legitimate reason to invade Iraq in 2003.

“There’s 10 minutes in Forbidden Lies which demonstrate why I made the film and they have nothing to do with Norma Khouri. In that 10 minutes, Rana Husseini, who I like to call the Jordanian Michael Moore, shows you the real Jordan. It’s why I wanted to get Forbidden Lies out there: to re-educate Western audiences who have bought the line that Arabs are evil when, in fact, they’re just like us.”

Aim High in Creation!, her upcoming and stylistically very different film, could also be described as having advocacy at its heart.

“My mission this time is to humanise the North Koreans, using a very entertaining premise: a motley bunch of crazy Sydney actors decide that, by making a propaganda short using Kim Jong-il’s propaganda film rules, they’ll stop a coal seam gas mine in St Peters.”

The rules she speaks of are contained in a manifesto published by the former leader of North Korea – the first translates as “aim high in creation”, the name of her film. Broinowski has twice travelled to North Korea to meet with and seek the advice of the country’s leading filmmakers and the footage gathered there will be part of the bigger film.

She studied every film about con artists she could find when editing Forbidden Lies – from The Sting through to Ocean’s Eleven. In this new film she will draw on the editing style of such films as Waiting for Guffman and Little Miss Sunshine.

“In my new film the question is: will these underdogs, who have taken on an impossible task, stop the gas mine? In those films the questions were ‘Will they or won’t they get the great producer?’ and ‘Will she or won’t she win the talent quest?’

Both Forbidden Lies and Aim High in Creation! have very consciously been described above as films, not documentaries, because Broinowski believes the distinction is out-of-date. Drama directors now borrow doco techniques, doco directors borrow drama techniques, and in the grey zone between, debate rages about truth, lies and manipulation.

“A starting point for me is that I don’t make the distinction any more between documentary and drama. They are all feature films...”

ANNA BROINOWSKI
WRITER/DIRECTOR/PRODUCER

Anna is an award-winning writer/director/producer. Past theatrical documentaries include Heil Bento!, Sexing the Label, Helen’s War and Forbidden Lies. Forbidden Lies won the Al-Jazeera Film Festival Golden Award, two AFI's, the Rome Film Festival ‘Out’ Prize, the Moscow Film Critics’ Prize, a Walkley Award and the Writers’ Guild of America’s Best Non-fiction Screenplay Award. Anna is currently working on a feature about Pauline Hanson, Please Explain, and theatrical documentary, Aim High in Creation!, produced by Lizzette Atkins and Unicorn Films.

FORBIDDEN LIES

of the idea – paying homage to one of the greatest propagandists of the 20th Century in the way she is – and the general inaccessibility of North Korea.

In order to test whether an idea would get bums on seats in cinemas, she suggested the audience interrogate that idea:

• Is the narrative arc more like a novel than a newspaper article? If not, it’s television current affairs.

• Will the film be compelling and absorbing?

• Is the subject topical and/or is there uniqueness of access?

• Is it internationally appealing?

• Does the inherent nature of the subject make it cinematic? Films for the cinema have to be visually and aurally strong so that audiences lose themselves by having a dream-like experience.

• Will the film push the boundaries of the form, be innovative, surprise and delight audiences, to ensure good word of mouth?

• Is the narrative arc more like a novel than a newspaper article? If not, it’s television current affairs.

“A starting point for me is that I don’t make the distinction any more between documentary and drama. They are all feature films...”
Think Big: Making documentaries for the big screen

NASHEN MOODLEY
SYDNEY FILM FESTIVAL DIRECTOR

Nashen is the Director of the Sydney Film Festival. From 2001 to 2011 he worked as the Manager and Head Programmer of the Durban International Film Festival and, since 2005, has been a Programming Consultant for the Dubai International Film Festival.

In 2008, Nashen was appointed Director: Asia-Africa for the Dubai International Film Festival. He has participated as a Berlinale Talent Campus Expert at the Internationale Filmfestspiele Berlin and has worked as an Industry Consultant at the International Film Festival Rotterdam.

Video interview with Nashen Moodley
Click to play (2 min 18 sec)
YouTube: www.youtube.com/watch?v=fpkD4D3R4

CROKER ISLAND EXODUS

Big-screen documentaries at a glance...

release and performance

DOCUMENTARY RELEASE, 2008–2012

Australian big-screen titles released (82)

INTERNATIONAL/DOMESTIC FESTIVAL/AWARD SCREENINGS (72)

LOCAL THEATRICAL RELEASE (35)

AUS$ 8,646,056

HIGHEST BOX OFFICE AUSTRALIA

Mrs Carey’s Concert (2011)

$1.2 million

BIGGEST FESTIVAL AND AWARDS SUCCESS

The Tall Man (2011)

Top 5 Feature Documentaries of all time (excluding IMAX)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TITLE</th>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>DISTRIBUTOR</th>
<th>ADJUSTED AUS$ BOX OFFICE (2012)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Woodstock</td>
<td>1970</td>
<td>Warner Bros.</td>
<td>$10,846,619</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fahrenheit 9/11</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Hopscotch</td>
<td>$10,326,047</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael Jackson’s This Is It</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Sony</td>
<td>$10,241,944</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Queen Is Crowned</td>
<td>1952</td>
<td>Greater Union</td>
<td>$9,271,069</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monty Python at Hollywood Bowl</td>
<td>1982</td>
<td>Greater Union</td>
<td>$7,265,230</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Compiled by Screen Australia from Motion Picture Distributors Association of Australia data.

Notes: Box office has been adjusted using CPI to 2012.

Top 10 Australian Feature Documentaries of all time (excluding IMAX)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TITLE</th>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>DISTRIBUTOR</th>
<th>ADJUSTED AUS$ BOX OFFICE (2012)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bra Boys</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Hopscotch</td>
<td>$1,018,292</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs Carey’s Concert</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>Metro Films</td>
<td>$1,184,261</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love the Beast</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Madman</td>
<td>$820,469</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Storm Surfers 3D*</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Madman</td>
<td>$860,583</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vincent</td>
<td>1987</td>
<td>Roadshow</td>
<td>$944,096</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sacred Sex</td>
<td>1991</td>
<td>Premium</td>
<td>$839,520</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Umbilical Florence</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Dendy</td>
<td>$495,014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forbidden Leaf</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Palace</td>
<td>$462,794</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paul Kelly: Stories of Me*</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Madman</td>
<td>$441,783</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aussie Assailant</td>
<td>1984</td>
<td>Hoyts</td>
<td>$438,773</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Compiled by Screen Australia from Motion Picture Distributors Association of Australia data.

Notes: Box office has been adjusted using CPI to 2012.

* Titles are still in release as at 31 January 2013.

Croker Island Exodus

International/domestic festival/award screenings (72)

Local theatrical release (35)

Both festival/award screenings and theatrical release (25)

2008-2012, Australian Title

BRAD BOYS (2007) $1.9 million

HIGHEST BOX OFFICE ALL TIME (EXCLUDING IMAX)

Woodstock (1970) $10.8 million

AUSTRALIAN TITLE

Mrs Carey’s Concert (2011) $1.2 million

BIGGEST FESTIVAL AND AWARDS SUCCESS

The Tall Man (2011)
Telling it like it is

TOP 10 TIPS FROM THE THINK BIG MASTERCLASS PARTICIPANTS

Know your story, know your structure and know your style clearly.

There’s no difference between feature films and documentaries when people line up at the box office.

Have a live performance at your festival screening. Make your screening an event!

An ob-doc filmmaker needs to be a novelist, not a polemicist.

Long lunches and looking after your interviewees pays off.

Test your central dramatic question by asking:
Will this happen?
Will that happen?
Will she survive?
Will he make it to the top of the mountain?
Will she be found innocent?

You’ve got to have three possible endings.

Make films with music!

Go into the edit suite knowing the punch line.

It’s got to be better than ‘good’.