



# THINK BIG

Making documentaries  
for the big screen



# Contents

Published by Screen Australia  
February 2013  
ISBN: 978-1-920998-24-0  
© Screen Australia 2013



The text in this report is released subject to a Creative Commons BY licence (Licence). This means, in summary, that you may reproduce, transmit and distribute the text, provided that you do not do so for commercial purposes, and provided that you attribute the text as extracted from *Think Big: Making documentaries for the big screen*, Screen Australia, February 2013. You must not alter, transform or build upon the text in this publication. Your rights under the Licence are in addition to any fair dealing rights which you have under the *Copyright Act 1968* (Cwth).

For further terms of the Licence, please see <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>. You are not licensed to distribute any still photographs or videos contained in this document without the prior permission of Screen Australia.

Front cover image:  
*Miss Nikki and the Tiger Girls*  
Production still: Tom Jefferson



<b>AT THEIR BEST, FEATURE DOCUMENTARIES INSPIRE</b> – Simon Chinn	
Sandy George reports	2
<i>including video interview with Simon Chinn</i>	4
<b>LEARNING LESSONS BY UNPACKING FLORENCE</b> – Gillian Armstrong	
Sandy George reports	6
<i>including video interview with Gillian Armstrong</i>	8
<b>TELLING IT LIKE IT IS</b> – Insights from the industry	9
<i>Video interview</i>	
Claire Gandy: Programming Manager, Dendy Cinema	10
<b>BE NOVELISTS, NOT POLEMICISTS</b> – Bob Connolly and Sophie Raymond	
Sandy George reports	11
<i>including video interview with Sophie Raymond</i>	12
<b>TELLING IT LIKE IT IS</b> – Insights from the industry	15
<i>Video interview</i>	
Paul Wiegard: Distributor, Madman Entertainment	16
<b>BIG-SCREEN DOCUMENTARIES AT A GLANCE</b>	
Research statistics: Production	17
<b>ON MAKING ADVOCACY FILMS BY STEALTH</b> – Anna Broinowski	
Sandy George reports	18
<i>including video interview with Anna Broinowski</i>	18
<i>Video interview</i>	
Nashen Moodley: Sydney Film Festival	20
<b>BIG-SCREEN DOCUMENTARIES AT A GLANCE</b>	
Research statistics: Release and performance	21
<b>TELLING IT LIKE IT IS</b>	
– Top 10 tips from the Think Big Masterclass participants	22

## TIPS FOR USING THIS INTERACTIVE RESOURCE

### NAVIGATING BACK AND FORTH

To advance pages: Left-click, page down or scroll down.  
To reverse pages: Right-click, page up or scroll up.

### FULL-SCREEN TOGGLE

Esc exits full-screen mode  
Ctrl + L returns to full-screen mode

### VIDEOS

You must have an active internet connection to view the videos.  
Once activated embedded videos can be viewed using the onscreen controls.  
iPhone and iPad users can view the videos via the YouTube links provided.

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?



**LIZ STEVENS**

Manager, Documentary  
February 2013

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 *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.



MAN ON WIRE

"*Searching for Sugar Man* is a good case in point," he says. "Fortunately, Sony Pictures Classics came on board and they understood the film would take time to build... The film opened softly and another distributor would have seen those figures and stopped spending (on the release) but Sony did the reverse and spent us out of trouble. The film has reached US\$2.6m and rising (in North America) and will be one of the highest grossing documentaries of the year."

The film's success illustrates another reason why it is very difficult to define theatrical documentaries, he adds: "Distributors have their own ideas about what makes a big screen documentary, but every year something comes along and blows everyone's theories out of the water."

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



**Video interview with Simon Chinn**  
Click to play (5 mins 56 sec)  
YouTube: [www.YouTube.com/watch?v=19ArT4PtqOw](http://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=19ArT4PtqOw)



**SEARCHING FOR SUGAR MAN**  
Photos © 2012  
Canfield Pictures/  
The Documentary  
Company



"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."

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.

"The big thing is time," he says. "None of my films have taken less than two years from conception to delivery and often they take three. These stories are created, crafted and written in the cutting room. 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.



**THE IMPOSTER**

**PRODUCER SIMON CHINN'S CAREER AT A GLANCE**

**Simon Chinn** was a television producer and journalist in the years before moving into the production of theatrical documentaries. He has produced three:

- *Man on Wire* (2008), d: James Marsh
- *Project Nim* (2011), d: James Marsh
- *Searching for Sugar Man* (2012), d: Malik Bendjelloul.

He is also executive producer on director Bart Layton's *The Imposter* (2012), which is due out in Australia in early 2013. Dimitri Doganis is the producer.

Chinn was inspired to make theatrical documentaries by director Kevin Macdonald's *One Day in September* (1999), an exploration of the hostage crisis that took place during the 1972 Olympic Games in Munich, in which Palestinian terrorists held then executed 11 Israeli athletes.

"It was a pretty seminal film for me," he says. "It's just archive and interviews and a historical story that we all know – or think we know – but there was something about the treatment of the material that blew my mind. It felt like a movie. I was working in television at the time and I absorbed it and wanted to emulate it."

When conceiving and producing his first film, *Man on Wire*, Chinn went to the producer of *One Day in September*, John Battsek, to pick his brains. Only then did Chinn learn that another of the films he most admired, Leon Gast's *When We Were Kings* (1996), about Muhammad Ali challenging George Foreman in the 1974 heavyweight championship in Zaire, had inspired Battsek to go into documentary.

Battsek's company Passion Pictures and Chinn's Red Box Films have since formed a strategic alliance.

Chinn and his films have won many awards in the past five years. *Man on Wire* earned an Academy Award® in the documentary category and a BAFTA Award for Outstanding British Film. The Producers Guild of America crowned Chinn Producer of the Year in 2009 for his factual work for the big screen. *Project Nim* won the award for Direction in the World Cinema Documentary section at the Sundance Film Festival and the Directors Guild of America Award for Best Documentary. *Searching for Sugar Man* has won numerous audience awards, including at Durban, Melbourne and Sundance, where it also took home the Special Jury Prize.

# 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

“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.”

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



**UNFOLDING FLORENCE: THE MANY LIVES OF FLORENCE BROADHURST**  
Photo: Anne Zahalka.

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.

“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.”



**Video interview with Gillian Armstrong**  
 Click to play (4 mins 23 sec)  
 YouTube: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=D2QbKD6i7OU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D2QbKD6i7OU)

**GILLIAN ARMSTRONG**

Gillian's feature films include *My Brilliant Career*, *Oscar and Lucinda* and *Charlotte Gray*. Gillian's documentaries include the award-winning series beginning with *Smokes and Lollies* in 1975 and finishing with *Love, Lust & Lies* in 2009. *Unfolding Florence: The Many Lives of Florence Broadhurst* (2006) was nominated for three AFI's and was the only Australian film selected by the Sundance Film Festival.

Gillian has received an AM for Services to the Australian Film Industry, an ADG Outstanding Achievement Award and a Women in Hollywood Icon Award.

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."



**LOVE, LUST AND LIES**  
 Above (left to right):  
 Diana, Josie and Kerry  
 Left: Filming



Telling it like it is

PEOPLE WHO BUY, PROGRAM, FUND AND MAKE DOCUMENTARIES PROVIDE SOME INSIGHTS

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

**Claire Gandy,**  
 Programming Manager, Dendy Cinemas

"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."

**Nashen Moodley,** Director, Sydney Film Festival

"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."

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

"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."

**Paul Wiegard,** Co-Founder, Joint Managing Director, Madman Entertainment

"It has to be cinematic. It has to have artistry. Any style will do, but for me the best feature documentaries also carry us deeply into personal worlds and explore intimate realities, via compelling characters.

A great documentary is bigger than the subject it pretends to treat. It reaches something universal. The best documentaries capture the unrepeatable moments of life."

**Tom Zubrycki,**  
 filmmaker and recipient of the 2010 Stanley Hawes Award

"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."

**Julia Scott-Stevenson,**  
 Communications Manager, Programmer, Antenna Documentary Festival



**Video interview with Claire Gandy**

Click to play (2 mins 51 sec)

YouTube: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=OHwMsVachUE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OHwMsVachUE)

**CLAIRE GANDY, DENDY CINEMAS  
(PROGRAMMING MANAGER)**

Claire has worked in the entertainment industry for over 15 years. Claire is currently with Dendy Cinemas Australia working as the National Programming Manager. Prior to that she worked as a Senior Programmer in the Film Department of Event/Greater Union Cinemas. She feels the same way about programming as Michael Moore did about filmmaking: "I just decided to make a movie. I had no training, no film school, but I had been to a lot of movies."



**STORM SURFERS 3D**

## Be novelists, not polemicists

**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.**

*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



**MRS CAREY'S CONCERT**

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. Buoyed 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.



**BOB CONNOLLY FILMING MRS CAREY'S CONCERT**

"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

"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

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 mouthed 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 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.



**Video interview with Sophie Raymond**

Click to play (4 mins 28 sec)

YouTube: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=XXkMRfUtJfo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XXkMRfUtJfo)

"... it had that cinematic moment... when you get to... experience... that instant transformation when she puts the violin up... and ceases to be a school girl." Sophie Raymond



**MRS CAREY'S CONCERT**

**"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 documentarian 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.



### **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*.

Her latest film, *Mrs Carey's Concert*, a feature documentary co-directed with Bob Connolly, 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 *Black Harvest* (1992). All three films won the Grand Prix at Cinéma du Réel and Best Documentary AFI's. 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.

## Telling it like it is

### PEOPLE WHO BUY, PROGRAM, FUND AND MAKE DOCUMENTARIES PROVIDE SOME INSIGHTS

"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 this 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  
Premiere Fund

"I 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."

**Nicolas Watson,**  
General Manager, Palace Films

"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."

**Joost den Hartog,**  
Director, Australian International  
Documentary Conference

"If I had to contain it to one golden rule, I'd say choose your subject well."

**Richard Moore,**  
Director, Brisbane  
International Film Festival



**Video interview with Paul Wiegard**

Click to play (3 min 32 sec)

YouTube: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=3jxMYfIyhv0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3jxMYfIyhv0)

**PAUL WIEGARD  
MADMAN ENTERTAINMENT**

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.

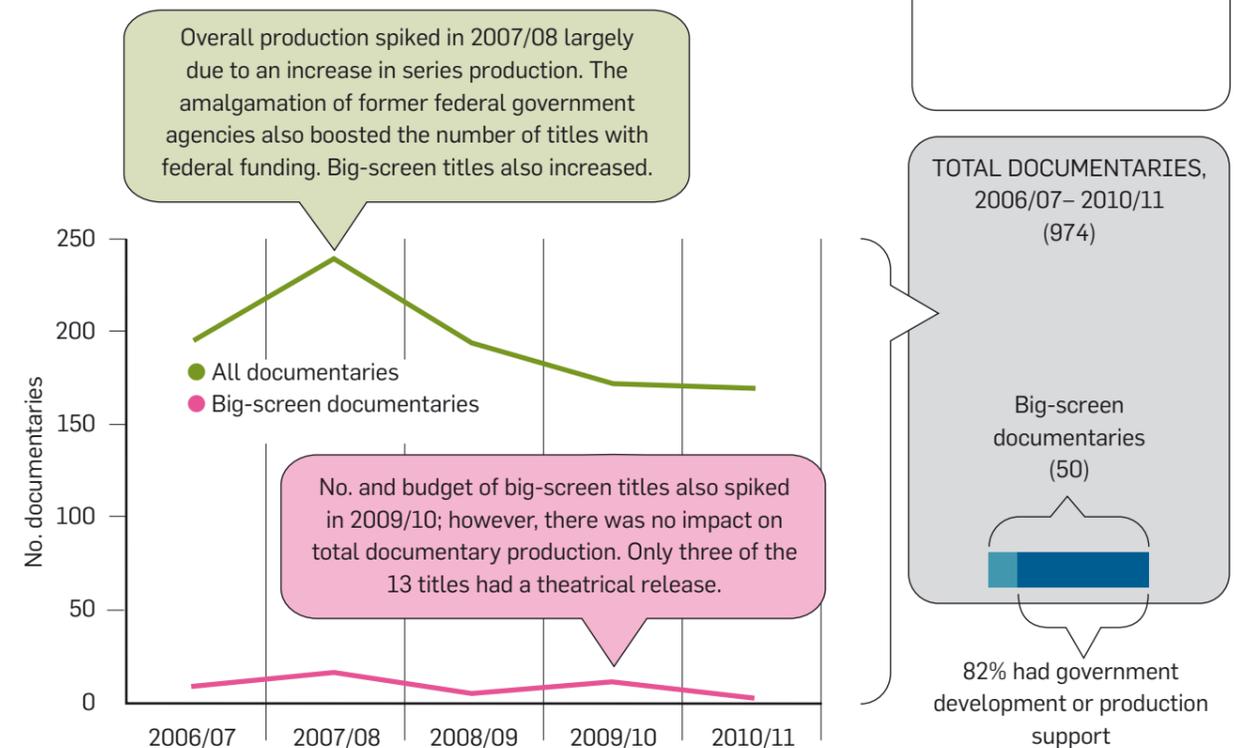
Paul executive produced *Balibo*, *My Year Without Sex*, *Not Quite Hollywood*, *Save Your Legs!* and *The Hunter*. He has executed the release of nine feature documentaries in Australia and New Zealand including *Searching for Sugarman*, *The Cove* and *Exit Through the Gift Shop*.



**NOT QUITE HOLLYWOOD**

# Big-screen documentaries at a glance... production

## AUSTRALIAN DOCUMENTARY PRODUCTION, 2006/07-2010/11



### BUDGETS

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.

PRODUCTION YEAR	PRODUCTION (NO. PRODUCED)		BUDGETS (\$M)	
	BIG-SCREEN DOCUMENTARIES	TOTAL DOCUMENTARIES	BIG-SCREEN DOCUMENTARIES	TOTAL DOCUMENTARIES
2006/07	10	197	3	103
2007/08	17	239	18	127
2008/09	6	194	3	110
2009/10	13	173	6	102
2010/11	4	171	6	135
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>974</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>579</b>
<i>Average</i>	<i>10</i>	<i>195</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>116</i>

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 Lie\$* 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 Lie\$* which demonstrate why I made the film and they have nothing to do with Norma Khouri. In that 10 minutes, Rana Hussein, who I like to call the Jordanian Michael Moore, shows you the real Jordan. It's why I wanted to get *Forbidden Lie\$* 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 Lie\$* – 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 Lie\$* 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.

"There is an increasingly sophisticated social media savvy audience out there that knows when they're being spun," she says. "A starting point for me is that I don't make the distinction any more between documentary and drama. They are all feature films... I'm more comfortable thinking of it first and foremost as a feature-length experience that absolutely absorbs the viewer."

In Broinowski's words *Aim High in Creation!* had been "a bitch to pitch" as a theatrical proposition. What helped, she says, was the craziness



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:

- Would the story be better if it is dramatised or does it deserve to be told in its real life form?
- 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..."

- Will the film be compelling and absorbing?
- Is the subject topical and/or is there uniqueness of access?
- Is it internationally appealing?

Broinowski also advised the audience, in the case of observational documentary, to walk into meetings with potential investors with three possible endings in mind and be able to convincingly argue that all of them will be brilliant.



**Video interview with Anna Broinowski**

Click to play (6 min 38 sec)

YouTube: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=b8nW2\\_Mr2Fc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b8nW2_Mr2Fc)

### ANNA BROINOWSKI WRITER/DIRECTOR/PRODUCER

Anna is an award-winning writer/director/producer. Past theatrical documentaries include *Hell Bento!*, *Sexing the Label*, *Helen's War* and *Forbidden Lie\$*. *Forbidden Lie\$* won the Al-Jazeera Film Festival Golden Award, two AFIs, the Rome Film Festival 'Cult' 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.



**Video interview with Nashen Moodley**

Click to play (2 min 18 sec)

YouTube: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=fp49i04jjR4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fp49i04jjR4)

**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.

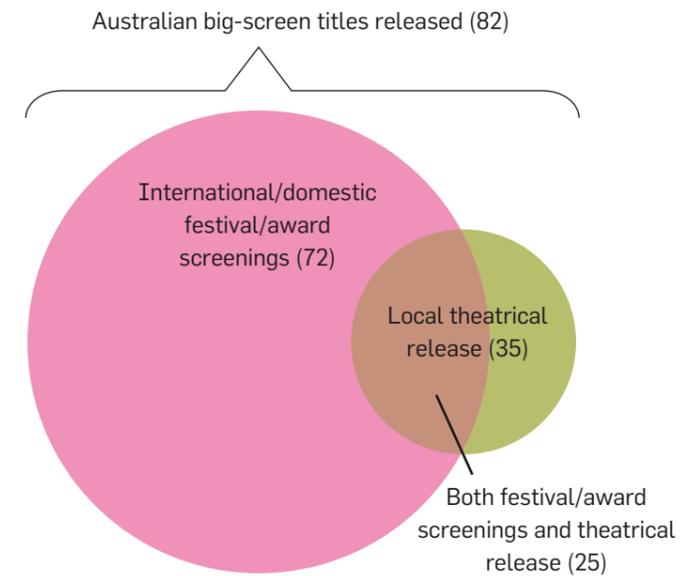
In 2008, Nashen was appointed Director: Asia-Africa for the Dubai International Film Festival. He has participated as a Berlinale Talent Campus Expert at the Internationale Filmfestspiele Berlin and has worked as an Industry Consultant at the International Film Festival Rotterdam.



**CROKER ISLAND EXODUS**

# Big-screen documentaries at a glance... release and performance

**DOCUMENTARY RELEASE, 2008-2012**



**HIGHEST BOX OFFICE ALL TIME (EXCLUDING IMAX)**  
*Woodstock* (1970) \$10.8 million

**AUSTRALIAN TITLE**  
*Bra Boys* (2007) \$1.9 million

**2008-2012, AUSTRALIAN TITLE 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)			
TITLE	YEAR	DISTRIBUTOR	ADJUSTED AUST. BOX OFFICE (2012 \$)
<b>WOODSTOCK</b>	<b>1970</b>	<b>Warner Bros.</b>	<b>\$10,846,619</b>
Fahrenheit 9/11	2004	Hopscotch	\$10,326,047
Michael Jackson's This is it	2009	Sony	\$10,241,944
A Queen is Crowned	1952	Greater Union	\$9,271,069
Monty Python at Hollywood Bowl	1982	Greater Union	\$7,265,230

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)			
TITLE	YEAR	DISTRIBUTOR	ADJUSTED AUST. BOX OFFICE (2012 \$)
<b>BRA BOYS</b>	<b>2007</b>	<b>Hopscotch</b>	<b>\$1,918,292</b>
Mrs Carey's Concert	2011	Music Films	\$1,158,281
Love the Beast	2009	Madman	\$826,469
Storm Surfers 3D*	2012	Madman	\$660,583
Vincent	1987	Roadshow	\$644,095
Sacred Sex	1991	Premium	\$639,520
Unfolding Florence	2006	Dendy	\$495,934
Forbidden Lie\$	2007	Palace	\$452,794
Paul Kelly: Stories of Me*	2012	Madman	\$441,783
Aussie Assault	1984	Hoyts	\$438,733

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.

# 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'.