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REPORT FROM THE 5TH MORELIA INTERNATIONAL FESTIVAL OF CINEMA

THIS IS WHY I MAKE DOCUMENTARIES....

By Nick Higgins

Front cover of La Jornada



This October, after five years' work on a documentary about a massacre in southern Mexico, I was invited to hold the Latin American premiere of the finished film at the 5th Morelia International Festival of Cinema. It was an invitation that both delighted and troubled me, it the first time the film would be seen in Mexico.

It all began nearly 10 years ago when a horrific event happened, when I was conducting fieldwork in Mexico, that deeply disturbed me. Forty five unarmed Mayan Indians, mainly women and children, were murdered over the space of a couple of hours in the village of Acteal, Chiapas. Even though the police and military were nearby they did not intervene. Not long after I finished my academic studies I resolved to make a documentary film about this massacre.

Back in 1997, pretty much immediately after the massacre happened, what has become known as 'the official version' of events first appeared. It was claimed, and continues to be reported, that the massacre was the result of a local dispute that had escalated into tragic violence. My film, *A Massacre Foretold*, is effectively a 58 minute riposte to this official version of events. The truth, as the film hopefully demonstrates, is that the ex-president of Mexico, Ernesto Zedillo, was the man ultimately responsible for the massacre, and that the attack on the innocent community of Acteal was part of a wider counter-insurgency strategy against the indigenous Zapatista rebels of southern Mexico.

Appropriately perhaps, the festival kicked-off with a controversy. The current Mexican president, himself born in Morelia, decided that he would like to be present at the opening ceremony. These days however, as a result of an electoral victory mired in accusations of fraud, anywhere the President goes becomes a focus for passionate protest. As the controversy hit the front covers of the national press, it was an instant reminder that this was a festival that would not be relegated to the culture or showbiz pages, and that cinema in Mexico is also politics.

Nick Higgins with Stephen Frears



Nick Higgins with survivors from Acteal



So when I walked out to face the audience after the first screening, I wasn't too sure what the reception might be but very quickly realised that the film had provoked a very powerful response of indignation, anger and sadness. For many in the cinema, particularly the many young people that attended the screening, this was a shocking account of a recent history they knew nothing about. For others it was a reminder of an event that had been consciously swept under the carpet and it had taken a 'Scottish foreigner' to return and remind them that this was one human rights crime that should not be forgotten. Quite quickly the press woke up to the story and after the second screening I was amazed to find my photograph on the front cover of the national paper, *La Jornada*, with the headline, 'The Victims of Acteal want Justice not Revenge'.

Things were going better than I had expected, and when the festival guests of honour, Stephen Frears and Bertrand Tavernier asked for a special screening to be arranged, the film began to generate quite a buzz. As the three of us sat and nattered about the film over tequilas later that day, with the Mexican cinema greats Cuarón, Inarritu, and Reygadas floating around the same bar, I had to pinch myself to be sure that all this was really happening.

For the final screening I had managed to arrange, with the kind help of the festival, for a human rights representative and two of the survivors from Acteal to be present for the Q&A. Both Javier and Alfredo from Acteal wore their traditional clothes and as we arrived at the cinema we experienced what can only be described as a paparazzi moment. Around 12 cameramen jostled to take our photographs and as we were escorted by festival staff through the crowded cinema lobby, I realised that the massed public were gathered to see our film. Sure enough the cinema was packed, people even cramming themselves into the aisles and exits so they could watch. A television news crew stood at the side waiting to record the Q&A.

Like many filmmakers I cringed and perspired through the projection, convinced the film looked terrible and that the audience were distracted, but at a certain point I looked round and realised that most people were crying. When the lights came up and the four of us took to the floor for questions the atmosphere in the salon was charged with emotion. If I tell you that nobody left the cinema and that the Q&A lasted longer than the film you might have some sense of the intensity of the moment. But what really made the screening special was the opportunity to share a platform with the survivors from Acteal. When asked how they felt about the film Javier replied, "it both pains me and makes me sad to see this film. It hurts, because they are my people that were killed, but it pains me more, because 10 years after the massacre there is still no justice."

Listening to Javier and observing the rare cultural phenomenon of an indigenous man being attentively listened to by a non-Indian audience, I thought to myself, this is why I do it. After the numerous rejections from commissioning editors, the months of bleary eyed concentration in the edit suite, and the many times when I thought it just isn't worth it... at that instant at least, and if ever I need to remember why I make documentaries... it is for moments like these.

Nick Higgins is a documentary filmmaker, whose company, Lansdowne Productions produces high quality creative documentaries for a national and international market.

www.lansdowneproductions.co.uk

Nick was funded to attend the Morelia Film Festival by Scottish Screen through our Markets & Festivals fund.

LATEST NEWS:

A Massacre Foretold has received the WACCS/SIGNIS Award for the Best Human Rights film of 2007.

Limited theatrical release in Scotland & beyond.

Lansdowne Productions is glad to announce a series of theatrical screenings in Scotland and a one-off screening in London.

Dumfries

Friday 30 Nov 2007

7:30 pm at the Robert Burns Cinema

London

Monday 3 Dec 2007

8:00 pm at the Roxy Bar & Screen

Dundee

Friday 7 Dec 2007

6:00 pm at the DCA

Edinburgh

Saturday 8 Dec 2007

4.30 pm at the Filmhouse

Glasgow

Tuesday 11 Dec 2007

6:00 pm the GFT

For more info please see:
www.massacreforetold.com