



## SON OF A GUN

A CHANCE HOLIDAY TO PAKISTAN INSPIRED A NOVICE FILMMAKER TO RIGHT THE MALIGNED IMAGE OF THE PASHTUN PEOPLE. **RUBY BOUKABOU**

On a motorcycle tour through India in August 2001, Australian paramedic Benjamin Gilmour and his girlfriend decided to venture into a country they knew nearly nothing about – Pakistan. When their bike was confiscated on the border, they were forced to venture in on foot and soon found themselves in Darra Adam Khel, a small village that is the main weapons supplier to the population of the North-West Frontier. Despite the town's reputation, they found it incredibly hospitable.

Dishing out medicine to celebrities on film sets in London a short time later, Gilmour was becoming infuriated by the one-sided post 9/11 press concerning the Pashtun people. He believed they needed to be seen in their own light and not condemned for a tribal code that mandated them to protect

fugitives. With foreign filming forbidden and no desire to have his story guided by authorities, he invested in a digital camera, donned a bearskin and snuck back into Darra, determined to restore balance to the coverage of the Pashtun in film.

The result is *Son of a Lion*, a Carolyn Johnson-produced doco flavoured drama, that has made the local Pashtun people proud and the international media sit up. After a screening at the recent Berlin Film Festival, Gilmour reveals why, and how, he did it.

"This village stuck in my mind – these little kids making guns and also the hospitality of the beautiful people," says Gilmour in a Japanese restaurant in East Berlin. "These guys are fierce and they've got guns, but it is only to protect themselves. The Pashtuns just want to be left alone. And I believe

that if they're given space they can combat extremism within their midst. It is there but the majority in those tribal areas are moderate thinking Muslims who are peace loving and they don't want trouble."

In making *Son of a Lion*, Gilmour was seeking to provide a platform for a local story that balanced the Islamophobia he was witnessing in the press and among "educated, intelligent friends" back home. He sought to share the humour and humanity of the people who had welcomed him in 2001. "It was only when I saw [British filmmaker] Michael Winterbottom's *In This World* shot on a MiniDV camcorder using non-professional actors in a similar environment that I realised I could possibly achieve my aim," he says.



*Son of a Lion* is about a young boy who yearns to go to school but whose father wants him to continue in the family tradition of gun making. Set in the small village, it involves a cast of caring uncles, strong fathers, worried grandmothers, taunting rival kids and plenty of goats. The plot weaves themes of politics, tradition, education and change, and was developed and shot with the locals over two years.

The term "embedded filmmaking" was thrown around a lot by the Berlinale film festival press, referring to Western directors shooting with locals as actors in remote regions without film industries, the term deriving from "embedded" journalists who live with soldiers in a war zone.

Gilmour however, dislikes the description. Stories from embedded positions are usually depicted as closer to a "truth", but Gilmour believes that they are too often shot and produced from their own side and without access to local, common opinion. "We desperately need more independent writers and filmmakers willing to take the risks involved in becoming embedded on the other side of the trenches," he says.

Gilmour prefers to describe what he made as "extreme guerrilla filmmaking", where most of the traditional logistics would either hinder or negate the objective. "*Son of a Lion* is in fact a drama film," says Gilmour. "It is acted, but the locals were given immense freedom to shape the story and dialogues and to introduce unscripted material, some of it in the form of political opinion. So it does have a documentary feel at times and the way it was shot on a MiniDV camera adds to this."

For producer Carolyn Johnson, *Son of a Lion* runs alongside films such as *Ten Canoes* and *Heart of Fire* which draw on both documentary and drama techniques to tell a story. "There's a contract with the audience when you present such a 'documentary' look, that what you're seeing is real, as well as being entertaining," she says. In order to gain this authenticity, Gilmour allowed his original script to dissolve in the nightly reading and laughter of the locals "who found it hilarious". He rewrote the original father/son story with the collaboration of the locals.

"Ben built the relationship with the Pashtuns and held firm to everything, staying credible to that world as he'd experienced it," says Johnson, "while I, along with the editor Alison McSkimming Croft, focused more on the narrative structure as a universal father and son story."

This partnership between a raw and inspired director alongside a seasoned producer proved to be the difference between the creation of intriguing and valid web-citizen journalism and A-list film festival material.

Johnson could see the potential in the rushes; she could see that Gilmour had unique access to an area that no one was getting into. She funded Gilmour's return trip while providing professional

## » THE MAJORITY IN THE PASHTUN TRIBAL AREAS ARE MODERATE THINKING MUSLIMS WHO ARE PEACE LOVING

post production – including an emotive soundtrack by Amanda Brown.

"Carolyn was shrewd but the ultimate optimist," says Gilmour. "She'd say, 'Great but there's just not enough and you're going to have to go back.' And I was terrified. I managed to get out alive... with my footage which hadn't been confiscated."



Did he feel in danger? "Yes. We nearly got caught a few times. To get around that area we were passing roadblocks every day. I didn't have a permit, I was disguised, I had a camera ... for all they knew I could have been a spy.

"The authorities have a tendency to make people 'disappear'. Do an internet search to see how many Pakistani journalists disappeared in tribal areas and turned up dead. This is the risk that I faced and the risk anyone collaborating with me faced. The stakes were very high."

Even now Gilmour is worried about the safety of his actors, particularly with a report from an audience member at opening night in Berlin that a Pakistani man in the middle of the audience had pulled out a camera and filmed the credits and left immediately afterwards.

"So naturally I'm edgy," he says. "I don't have the resources like the people who

made *The Kite Runner* to fly their two main characters out. My characters said to me, 'We're not going with any authorities. We will not go willingly.' It's Pashtun nature. They will fight. So I am worried.

But, that's a risk they were willing to take to tell their story. They're very brave people. They're more interested in having people in the world know what they're really like. They know about the image they have. It's a tragedy for them to be

aware that people around the world think they're terrorists.

"After living with the Pashtuns in the south of Peshawar in no-go areas for almost a year, one leaves with a very clear picture of the character of this maligned and misunderstood ethnic group who are all too readily lumped in the 'terrorist' basket.

"They are, in fact, freedom-loving, kind and generous people, with a unique sense of irony and humour not unlike the Australian sense of humour.

"Ordinary Pashtuns believe, as I do, that they can oppose local extremism without Pakistani or foreign military interference, which they despise.

"I think filmmaking has a lot of potential for reaching large audiences," he says. "All you need is a strong idea and a camera, and then you just go to the place – film it. If you've got a strong enough story and your heart's in it, you can succeed. I hope that's inspiring to people."

*Son of a Lion* will premiere at the Sydney Film Festival in June followed by a cinematic release in August. This will coincide with the release of the book, *Warrior Poets*, about Gilmour's experiences making the film on the frontier. ■

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