

A CONVERSATION WITH JON BLAIR

Can you introduce yourself?

It is difficult to know quite where to begin when introducing myself. I am originally a political exile from South Africa and my childhood there in the 50's and 60's has certainly been one of the most important things in making me the person I am today. I was part of the privileged white minority in that country but from an early age I found apartheid intolerable, so at the age of 16, once I had been drafted into the apartheid army, I left for good.

I am certain that it is because of this background that as a journalist and film-maker I have had an especial sensitivity to stories about injustice, human rights abuse, poverty, and war, and the victims of these horsemen of the apocalypse. These themes have permeated much of my work, although you would be stretched to find them in the comedy that I have also done!

I have been working in journalism, film and television for more than 35 years now which I find amazing as I still feel like a new-comer, though I do get called a "veteran" every now and again which is a bit disturbing. I guess that is as much because I have been lucky on the awards front in winning a few of the majors in our field...an Oscar, a couple of Emmy's, an IDA Distinguished Achievement Award, a British Academy Award, a Cable ACE and even a Grammy! But anyone who reads this is I hope smart enough to know that these all count for nothing as you are only ever as good as your next film.

What inspired this film? How did you find your subjects?

I was lucky. While recce'ing another project in Brazil I ran into Tom Phillips who is a brilliant young English journalist working as a foreign correspondent in Rio de Janeiro, and he then introduced me to Douglas Engle, an American photo-journalist also based in Rio. Together they had been developing a relationship with a backstreet evangelical pastor in one of Rio's most violent slums over the previous year or so. Pastor Jonny trod a difficult path with the gangsters who control most of Rio's slums, trying to persuade them to turn away from their violent lives. As a former gangster himself he understood their lives and in his new vocation he seemed literally to be "Dancing with the Devil". Through him Tom and Douglas had gained the trust of the gangsters themselves and when they told me of this relationship I felt that what they had represented a unique opportunity to make a documentary such as had never been seen before.

As it turned out I was right: no one has ever filmed Rio's top drug lords openly, without disguises or blurring or any other device to hide their identities, and no one has ever shown such an intimate portrait of gang life in this city where more than 1,000 people die each year at the hands of the police in a bloody urban civil war. How many more are killed by the gangsters themselves is anyone's guess.

At the same time as we became trusted by the gangsters, we developed a close relationship with a unit of Rio's elite drug squad who also gave us unrestricted access to their lives and their operations. This too had never happened before.

As a result DANCING WITH THE DEVIL is quite unlike any other documentary, or even fictional portrayal of the underbelly of one of South America's most violent (and beautiful) cities. In our film I believe we portray a world of moral ambiguity where an audience's pre-suppositions are thrown into confusion, and where from one moment to the next issues of right and wrong are open to doubt.

During the making of the film several of our subjects were killed. Were they victims, or did they bring their death on themselves. You have to decide but one thing is sure, the answers are not simple.

What were some of the biggest challenges/surprises you encountered in making the film?

Rio's drug lords and their gangs are some of the most heavily armed individuals in the world. They impose their rule of law in their kingdoms with fear and death, and they carry automatic weapons openly in the streets. To fight them, the police are also heavily militarized and operations into the favelas can sometimes involve up to 1000 policemen armed with automatic weapons and traveling in armored personnel carriers. Death on the streets is virtually a daily occurrence.

Working in this world was extremely dangerous. The entire crew had to be equipped with body armor and ballistic helmets, and although I have covered a number of war zones over the years on three continents, I do not believe I have ever been at greater risk than I was in one of the great tourist capitals of the world.

During two police operations that we filmed we were fired on by the traffickers with automatic weapons and during one, a policeman was shot very near to us and later died from his wounds.

On another occasion part of the crew were given a tour of his territory by one of Rio's most wanted men who is a central character in our film. As part of this adventure he insisted on driving them at close to 80 miles per

hour along the sidewalk between a brick wall and the lamp posts. They emerged unscathed but pretty shaken!

For me there was also a particular challenge of not speaking any Portuguese. During the shoot this was limiting but I was fortunate in that either Douglas or Tom were always on location with us but it did mean that some of the nuances of what people were saying or of particular situations were lost on me until I got detailed translation during the edit. Talking of the edit, I never anticipated that editing a film entirely in a foreign language neither I nor the editor spoke, would be quite so difficult which only goes to show how naïve I am, even after all these years.

To say that making this film was a challenge would, I think, be something of an understatement. On the plus side, I hope that the result provides an immediacy and intimacy quite unlike any previous film about this world.

You said you hadn't anticipated the difficulty of editing a film in a foreign language, but how much experience have you got of filming in foreign countries?

I am actually more experienced filming outside of the UK or the USA than I am of making films in these two countries in which I have lived over the last 40 plus years. I have covered wars on three continents – The Far East, the Middle East, and Africa – and I have filmed in more countries than I can remember on every continent except Australasia. That having been said, this is the first time I have made a film with so few English speakers.

What do you shoot on?

I started my career shooting on film but budgets being what they are I have not used film since the mid 1990's unfortunately. I have never been a fan of videotape but I do now think that the new Sony XDCam HD technology which records on a sort of bluray disc is about as good as it gets, other than film. DANCING WITH THE DEVIL was shot primarily with a Sony PDW700 but some sequences also used a much smaller Sony EX3 which I own which gave really amazing pictures given that it is a relatively inexpensive piece of kit. I also love the workflow that this new technology allows.

There have been quite a few films recently, both documentary and fiction, set in South American favelas so why should people go to see DANCING WITH THE DEVIL?

I think I have already answered that in the sense that although there have indeed been some films, none have been able to penetrate as far below the

surface of this dangerous and unknown world as we did. Until **DANCING WITH THE DEVIL** most documentary film-makers have had to rely on NGO's working in the favelas to get them access, and inevitably the resulting film is slanted towards the work of that NGO. In our case you simply find the raw stories of the people engaged in this urban drug war and I think it is far more satisfying and illuminating as a result. Of course in fiction it easier, and that is why both *City of God* and *Elite Squad*, though based on true stories, ultimately emerged as fiction films.

But make no mistake, I see my job as a film-maker first and foremost to entertain, and only after that to inform, and I think this film, of which I am immensely proud, and which I also happen to think is one of my best pieces of work ever, is really entertaining. It is also surprisingly beautiful, thanks in very large part to Lance Gewer's stunning cinematography and Matt Briggs' brilliant editing.

I think this film might make some people very angry, particularly in Brazil where the media tends to portray the issue in very simplistic terms. Those who like to see the world in terms of black and white, those who cannot bear to believe that a brutal killer and drug lord can be anything except deeply evil, will I expect have problems with my refusal as a film-maker to take a moral stand either for or against the police or the gangs. But that's my style: I want you the audience to make up your mind where you stand, not have me take a position for you.

Who are some of your favorite filmmakers?

Oooh, that's a difficult one. For every person that occurs to me I then think of three more. Maybe I will answer that by simply saying that one of my favourite sayings came from the French director Louis Malle who said something along the lines that he had started his career believing that to be successful he needed to be as complicated as possible, and that over the years he spent his career seeking simplicity, which was much more difficult to achieve.

What is your all time favorite documentary?

Pass. I don't have an all time favorite, just lots of films that I have enjoyed and a few that are really special

What other projects are in the pipeline?

I am currently in post-production with a doc for HBO called "Is Everybody Alright?" After that, I wish I could be sure!

What are some of your creative influences?

I started what is now laughingly called my “career” as a print journalist but quite early on I gravitated to the world of film as a way of more graphically being able to tell stories using pictures and sound as well as words. I never went to film school so I am completely self-taught, or more accurately, I picked up what I could by watching how other people did it as I went through the ranks of film and television, first as a researcher, then what they call in England an AP, which I am never quite sure is either an Associate Producer or Assistant Producer, but really means someone who does everything but doesn’t get the pay or the credit for it. Finally when I became a Producer/Director I still beg, borrow and steal from wherever I see something that looks good, that touches me in some way, or that seems to make my story-telling more effective. I am not interested in trickery or being a virtuoso, and I believe that nothing beats a good story simply told.