

PASSION PROJECT

Missing in the

LAND

OF GODS

Davor Dirlic is a Croatian film maker living in Australia, whose film 'Missing in the Land of Gods' follows Jock and Di Chambers as they return to India to search for their son Ryan, who went missing on a gap year in India 8 years ago. Davor's film was selected for screening at the 2013 Warburton Film Festival and he, Jock and Di were invited to a Q&A session after the film screened to a packed house. It was an emotional Q&A session, after which I felt compelled to interview him, to tell Ryan's story to a wider audience and to show that startups come in all shapes and sizes.



In a couple of sentences, can you describe your upbringing and what you loved most about it?

I grew up in Zagreb with a very loving mother with an enormous, almost irresponsible, tolerance for my youthful escapades, and an ambitious father with an excessive need to control. Part of me has always rebelled, and for the most part my Dad and I didn't get on.

I loved growing up, playing in the street with friends in that pre-computer era, where we created our own games and rules using our own imagination. There was an innocence as well as roughness to our games, and at times I did mischievous reckless things influenced by hormones and peer pressure that only just stopped short of delinquency.

You moved to Melbourne in 1989, what prompted that move and do you miss Croatia?

When I finished film school I knew I wanted to move to an English speaking country, to make films in a universal language that would connect me to a broader audience. I remember there was a month of Australian films on TV Zagreb, which showed some of the best Aussie movies made in the 70' and 80's and I was impressed. Economically the situation in ex-Yugoslavia was worsening so the idea of moving abroad seemed even more sensible. I still have family and a few old friends in Croatia, and I go to see them every now and then. I love the country and it's always exciting to go back and reconnect with it as it's deeply part of me. But 24 years on, I feel at home in Melbourne.



Growing up did you always want to be a filmmaker?

When I was really young I wanted to be a rockstar and by the age of 10 I'd convinced my parents to buy me my first guitar. I played in bands growing up and have never stopped playing guitar, but my filmmaking proved to be the more dominant passion in my life.

In a couple of sentences can you describe for me your path into film making, from school onwards?

At film school I specialized in film editing, and after graduating I started cutting other filmmakers' short films and documentaries. The first films I made myself were short observational essays about Zagreb, where I'm from, which I tried to explore from the perspective of the margins of society. A colleague from film school shot the films while I directed and edited them. They were shot on reverse 16mm film, guerrilla style, on such low budgets that we could make quite a few of them. I also started to make short dramas, working with actors as I became more cinematically ambitious.

Then I moved to Melbourne, which was life changing and which changed my filmmaking as well. At that time I started to operate the camera, which I hadn't done in Croatia. From that point on, I've shot my own documentaries, and it's an experience I absolutely love.

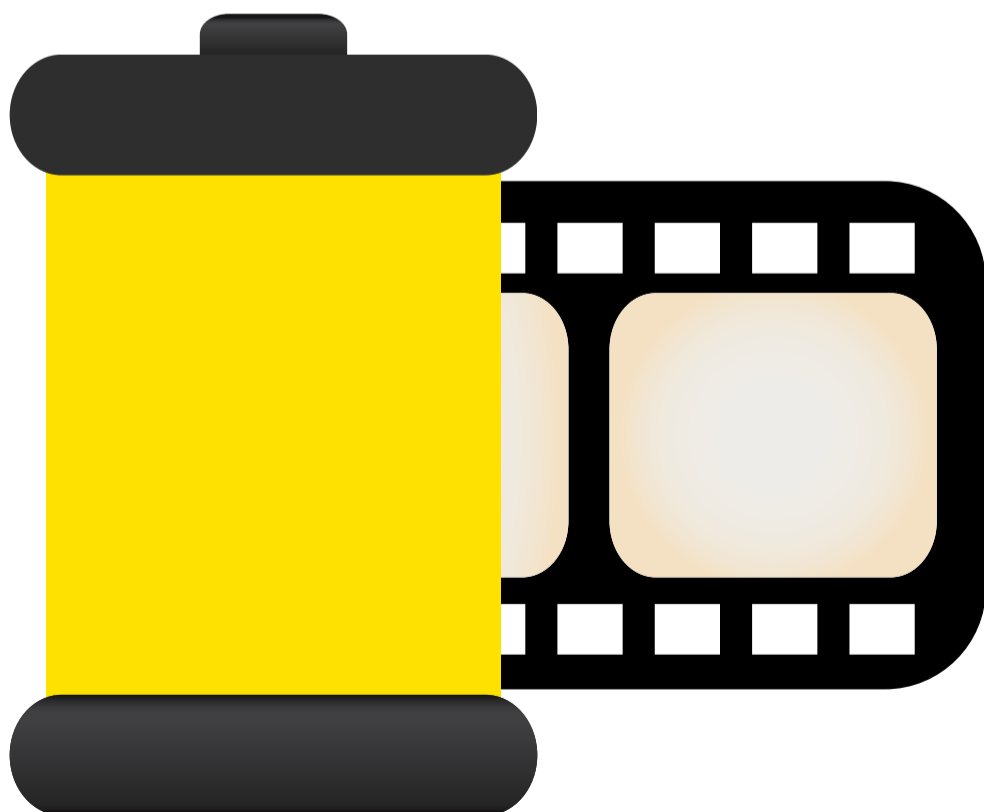
Do Not Resuscitate

Why did you choose the emotive topic of euthanasia?

I suppose I felt comfortable with emotions and voluntary euthanasia is an endlessly perplexing topic; every case is unique and every story confronts you on a different level. I wanted a challenge that would take me into the mystery of death, seen through a decision making process by those who looked death in the face. And yes, it proved to be emotive and complex, but it was also very illuminating.



What were your views before filming and did they change as a result of making your documentary?



Before I started filming I'd never spent time with someone who was going through the process of dying, but I did feel that people should have a choice to decide about their own death particularly if suffering from terminal illness and going through physical pain.

In the film I followed three people who wanted the right to choose how and when they die. What I witnessed while working with them, and what still resonates with me several years on, was how terribly lonely these people often were, whether they lived with others or alone, and how the fear of losing control at the end of

their life had become a far more important issue than the issue of love and connectedness with the world.

It made me realise that almost nothing about voluntary euthanasia is black and white. And reinforced my view that modern societies have turned us into blind consumers, with a need to be 'in control of our lives', aspiring always to be young and healthy. But that when that aspect of our life is suddenly taken away due to an incurable illness, it seems there is nothing else left for us to carry on and live for. All that's left is physical pain.

It's interesting that in developing countries where people live a less materialistic lifestyle, voluntary euthanasia is not such a big issue, and death, as part of life's process, seems to have more of a meaning. In the west our mindset is less spiritual and more matter-of-fact and the issue of euthanasia will keep knocking on our door. I continue to see death as a mystery that holds many more questions than answers while the enormous complexity of voluntary euthanasia outweighs the need for me to take sides.

Do you get involved with your subjects, or remain distanced? If so, how and why?

I make films where emotions are a major part of the cinematic texture, and to get into the hearts and minds of my subjects I do get involved with them. But it's not part of any strategic decision it is part of my personality, and my filmmaking technique is the result of it. Operating from a distance on something as "alive" as making a film about people who go through a significant change in their life would not work for me.

Every film of mine is a journey of change, and filming goes on for a while. I can spend a couple of years making a film, so it's normal for me to become close to the participants and identify with their situation. Part of this is why I film as a one-man crew, because it allows a close, undistracted level of collaboration between my subjects and me.

Missing in the Land of Gods

Why were you researching gap years going wrong as a topic for a documentary?

I suppose because not many documentary films had touched on the topic before, yet thousands of young people see it as a rite of passage, and embark on a major overseas trip. Occasionally young travelers get into trouble, and some even go missing. Ryan's story was representative of young westerners looking for an experience in the East, which went wrong. His disappearance, and the ramifications of it, had a number of human and dramatic ingredients that prompted me to continue my research and make the film.

How did you first hear of Di and Jock's search for their son?

There was an on-line article, an interview with Jock and Di about their search for Ryan, which I found on google as part of my general research about young Australians traveling overseas. It was the end of 2008, Ryan had been missing for three years, and they had already been to India and searched for him twice with no success. The story was so compelling that I immediately knew I wanted to get in touch with them, to see if they planned to return to India to continue the search, and if so, would they agree to me going with them. It took me two days to find Jock's work telephone number and give him a call. It took him two minutes to say yes.

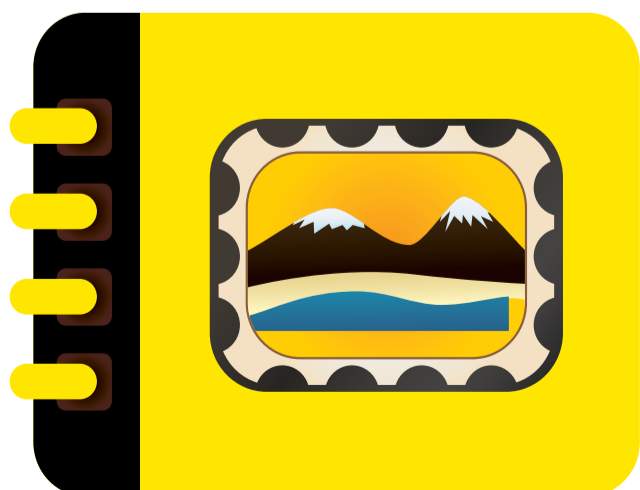
How did you approach filming these parents at such a desperate time in their lives, searching for their son against such odds in the chaos of India?

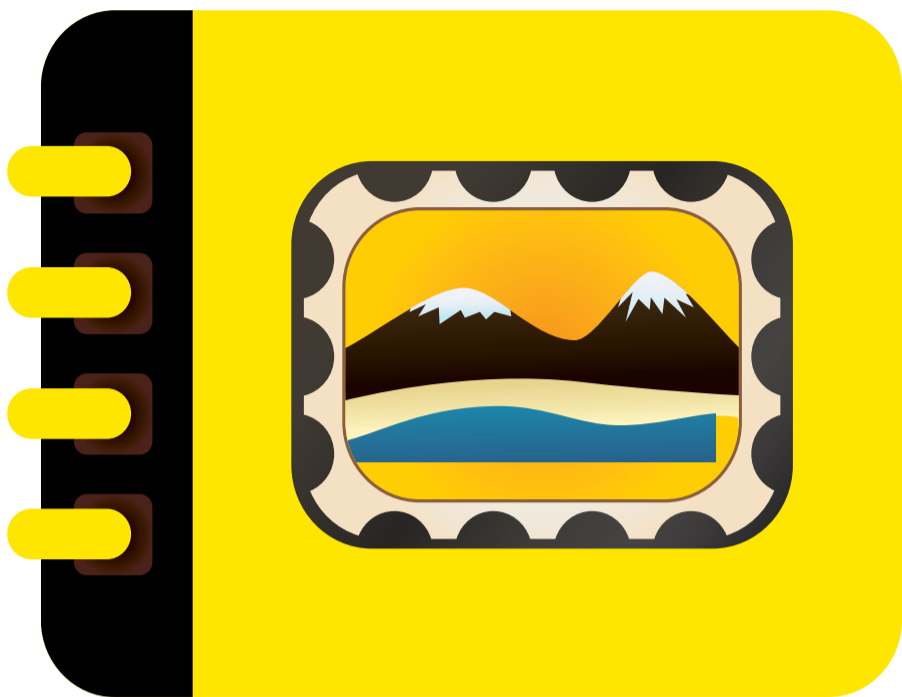
Before we went to India I visited Jock and Di at their home in Mt Gambier, South Australia to conduct the initial interviews with them. That helped a great deal, as it gave us a chance to sit down, have a cup of coffee and talk about all sort of things. And I quickly realised how very down to earth they were; ordinary people who just happen to have found themselves in an extraordinary situation. They seemed to be coping very well by not allowing the tragedy to take away their hope of finding Ryan.

At a deeper level though, they had been on a relentless emotional roller coaster since he went missing, and I sensed there was a lot of vulnerability under the surface. I knew that traveling with them and actively looking for Ryan in India was going to be

a much more sensitive undertaking, and it was. We literally lived together for four weeks; traveling across a country of 1.5 billion people in heavy monsoon conditions, searching the crowded streets and corners, talking to anybody who thought they might have some idea about Ryan's whereabouts.

The level of physical energy Jock and Di put into the search was quite something and not once did they ask me to stop rolling the camera. There were times when I felt I walked a fine line between asking and not asking upsetting questions. The good thing was they would immediately answer me honestly. So whilst there was a bit of underlying tension and anxiety at the beginning, we aligned in time and they opened up and allowed me to ask the sensitive questions that a probing filmmaker needs to ask.





It's an intense thing to do, to dip into people's lives at such stressful times, do you become friends and keep in touch?

As a filmmaker, I tend to be attracted to individuals who manage to keep hold of their humanity in times of trouble; those who dare to fight injustice or step out of their comfort zone to demystify the unknown. I think it's natural then to try and connect with such people, become friends with them and stay in touch after the filming in so far as you can.

What's next for you? Are you researching another documentary?

A few yes, I've been researching a film about an alternative charity that's building orphanages in developing countries, a film about introduction of modern radio journalism in countries troubled by political unrest and a film about the unique culture of the magnificent Dinka people.

I'm always on the hunt for a new idea that has enough human and cinematic substance to be turned into an interesting film.



If it moves me, I'll gladly write about it. Helen Collier, owner of [Just Words](#), writes for businesses, magazines, philanthropists and always ...for pleasure.

