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Documentaries: Both Informing and Entertaining New Zealanders

William De Friez, Veronica McCarthy
Raconteur Productions Ltd., Christchurch

William (“Bill”) De Friez and Veronica (“Ronni”) McCarthy own and operate Raconteur Film and Television Productions located in downtown Christchurch. Bill serves as part-time director; his full-time position is faculty lecturer in the Film Department of the University of Canterbury. Ronni is the full-time producer for their small business operation that completes an average of three documentaries per year as well as a network children’s series and other special projects. She won the prestigious Winston Churchill Fellowship in 1995 to study children’s television outside of New Zealand.

NEJE: *Ronni, you’ve kept your maiden name, but you and Bill are very much married. Bill occasionally serves as the film director on Raconteur projects, and you’re the full-time producer. Don’t directors and producers often have anti-thetical ideas about movie production? How do you balance that along with your marriage day after day and year after year?*

Ronni: It’s not easy! Bill doesn’t always understand that I have to represent the best interests of our clients, keep tight tabs on the budget, and get our documentaries finished on time. It certainly involves a lot of creative tension.

Bill: Please! Excuse me, Ronni; but what you really don’t like is that directors, to be good at their craft, sometimes have to take creative flights of fantasy to break new ground. That scares you. Admit it.

Ronni: Bill, I understand your need for creativity, to get to the core of the idea we are presenting in our work; but you need to appreciate my job and how important it is for us to stay grounded, to understand the constraints that exist in delivering the product on time and within budget.

Bill: Believe me, I *do* appreciate what you and other film producers accomplish. However, it shouldn’t always be time and money that dictate what we do and how we do it. Our work needs to inform and educate our viewers while entertaining them and keeping them focused on what they are seeing. That’s a huge challenge.

NEJE: *How did the two of you meet?*

Ronni: We both worked in the television production depart-

ment of TV New Zealand and started to work on similar projects.

NEJE: *What got you interested in film production in the first place?*

Bill: I first got into film with the *Bristol Freighter* documentary in 1984. I had become fascinated with the last flight this famous plane was going to make before it was dismantled. It was a hell of a story, but TV New Zealand did not want to run it. I wanted badly to make it, so we raided the station’s film inventory room, found enough unused film to make a short documentary, “borrowed” one of the station’s film production trucks, and did the whole thing on a shoestring budget.

NEJE: *Had you studied film in university?*

Bill: No, I was an electrician by training and did a lot of work for the forestry service before turning to film. But film was always my passion; I love to make documentaries, and I watch every film I can. It’s an amazing creative process.

NEJE: *And you, Ronni?*

Ronni: I have been involved in some type of television production from just about my first job out of university. To me, television production, particularly the documentary format, gives me the opportunity to bring new and helpful information to a wide audience. It’s the best way I can think of to serve my community meaningfully, and I feel really good about that. What we do gives voice to the average New Zealander. I’m also passionate about creating high quality children’s programs. They deserve the best we can do.

NEJE: *What was your first successful documentary?*

Bill: We achieved national recognition when we produced a documentary called *Scorched Memories* in 1995 on the 50th anniversary of the infamous Ballantyne retail store fire. I say “infamous” because scores of employees died when a fire started in the basement and quickly moved up to the ground through five floors of the building. It housed the retail floor operation as well as the administrative offices. There were inadequate fire escape exits, and some of the exits were inaccessible as they were blocked by merchandise and office supplies. Worse, the fire alarm was not sounded for more than 10 precious minutes because man-

agers did not want to unduly frighten store customers or employees. Loyal to the core, many employees did not leave their posts until given permission by management. For many, it was too late to save themselves.

We asked to speak to the Ballantyne Executive Board or the Ballantyne family before making the documentary, but they declined to speak to us. We wanted their perspective five decades after the tragedy, but this is a store management that did not formally apologize for its culpability in the loss of life until 1990. There's a strict hierarchy within the store's management, and Ballantyne family members remain firmly in control. No one apparently dares speak out about how the family felt about the fire and what they did internally to correct operations after the fire.

NEJE: *What other documentary topics have you tackled?*

Ronni: Recently, we have produced films on topics as diverse as eating disorders, teenage male fathers and how they cope, men and women who have married multiple times, gambling addiction, a behind-the-scenes look at our emergency ambulance services, and a trio of documentaries on body parts.

NEJE: *Body parts? Can you be more specific?*

Ronni: Sure. We've produced educational films on the breast, vagina, and penis. The next one to come along, something we're working on right now, is going to be called *The Bum*. We're screening talent right now. Want to be considered?

NEJE: *Ummm . . . no thanks. How have New Zealanders reacted to the body parts series?*

Bill: Extremely well. They're the most widely distributed films we've ever produced. Our agent tells us the documentaries are popular as far away as Israel. We didn't make the series to titillate our audience; it was all about educating the public, dispelling myths and celebrating diversity.

NEJE: *What about your work in children's programming?*

Ronni: We are currently involved in two quality children's programming, one called *The Big Chair* and the other, *Animation Station*.

NEJE: *How do you receive initial funding for your documentaries?*

Bill: The national New Zealand networks provide about 30 percent of the money we need; but most of our funds are derived from "New Zealand on Air," a of government-funded broadcasting commission with a mandate to tell and show New Zealand stories.

Ronni: There are different funding groups depending on whether you are seeking seed money for television, radio,

or music. We usually approach at least three different funding sources with our concept for a new documentary and see who "bites."

NEJE: *What funding level do you need to produce a documentary?*

Ronni: It's an average of \$100,000 N.Z. (about U.S. \$53,000) for a typical 42-minute documentary. The networks require 18 minutes for advertising and other promotional considerations each broadcast hour.

NEJE: *That's all? It doesn't sound like much money.*

Bill: Our staff usually ends up making more money on shooting the documentary than we do as the director and/or producer. No one gets rich making films in New Zealand unless your name is Peter Jackson. He's a great guy and I admire what he's done with *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, but Peter is the exception. By far. Many producers go bankrupt. Just recently Larry Parr, a well-known filmmaker, had to close his shop. Why? Because after a long and distinguished career, he made one film that didn't sell very well; and the bank cut off funds for his next project, which, by the way, was almost finished. Larry desperately tried to find other sources to back him, but everyone knows funding movie production is a dicey proposition at best. So his operation went under.

Film production in New Zealand is a cottage industry for the most part. Few folks work at it full time. Our country is internationally famous for our short films; however, a lot of people who have worked on those productions in the past were not paid. They hired on at no pay hoping if the movie somehow received international attention they might one day get some compensation.

To Peter Jackson's credit, he sold himself to the executive producers as the best choice for director of *The Lord of the Rings* project. This was based, in part, on several financially successful movies he had made including *Bad Taste* and *The Frighteners*. Peter insisted on New Zealand as the place for the film's setting, and this has really put New Zealand "on the map" in the global film industry. The trilogy took three years to shoot and edit, and Peter's production company employed as many as 2,500 local people at one time. Once the project was finished, however, most of those folks had to find jobs outside of the industry. We just can't sustain that level of activity on a regular basis in such a small country.

I must also point out that the trilogy has been fantastic for tourism. There's a boom going on right now due to the America's Cup race in Auckland and tours to all *The Lord of the Rings'* film locations.

Ronni: Unfortunately, most of our films are never seen outside of New Zealand. Occasionally we sell our work to

Australian television, but it often stops there. We dream some day of selling one of our documentaries to the United States. Oh, my, wouldn't that be lovely! The financial remuneration would be considerable.

NEJE: *What would happen if you did reap a large revenue stream?*

Ronni: First thing, we would have to pay back the initial seed money to the funding organization. The distributor would take 30 percent off the top; then the funding organization would receive 70 percent of the remaining proceeds until the initial funding level, say \$100,000, is paid back. We don't really see much money until after the film distributor and upfront funds are all paid back.

The government helped put together a Film New Zealand public relations effort, and representatives from our local film companies started to attend a lot of international conferences to sell our country as a viable setting for their film production. The goal was to attract three major film productions per year. Currently Tom Cruise is in the country shooting *The Last Samurai*, and Gwenth Paltrow will be working with Peter Jackson on a reshoot of *King Kong*. But that's about it.

Bill: Many of the people who work in the film industry are nonunion. This has the film unions in the United States pretty upset. There's a quiet movement going on right now to make sure that when American talent is hired for a New Zealand shoot that they use only union members. I suppose the American unions are hoping this will rub off on us. We'll have to wait and see.

NEJE: *Bill, since you teach film at the local university, do any of your students ever end up working for you?*

Bill: Absolutely. I have had the pleasure of working with some top-notch students, and there are times when their paths and mine cross again after they graduate. They often are as passionate as I am about creating an entertaining story and telling it well.

Raconteur is the largest, most successful documentary maker on the South Island. Most film making of this type is done up in Auckland or Wellington on the North Island. An analogy to Americans would be, perhaps, us being situated in Philadelphia whereas most of the documentary production would be occurring in New York City.

People around the Christchurch area (*population 200,000*) depend on us for employment in the film industry, and that includes many of my ex-students. By hiring them and other local people, I feel I'm giving back to the city and to my film community. And I'm not the only one who teaches in the family. Ronni teaches TV production at

the Polytechnic University in Christchurch, and she is currently mentoring three graduate students.

Ronni: Not a day goes by without someone sending in his or her resume asking whether we are hiring. We are motivated to work hard and press ahead, in part, so we can employ more people who need jobs in the film industry.

In fact, 2002 was our busiest year. We produced four documentaries and several dozen "Animation Station" programs geared for children at the 4:15 PM time slot on our Channel 3. The shows are just seven and a half minutes in length, but putting together five new shows each week takes a lot of coordination. However, it's all been good fun, and we hope to continue this pace for as long as we can.

NEJE: *Bill mentioned mentoring students earlier and getting them involved in current projects. What mentoring work do you do?*

Ronni: I'm currently an executive member of the Screen Producers & Developers Association, representing producers and directors in New Zealand. I was a founding member of Screen Canterbury, an organization formed to promote film and television in the greater Canterbury region. I'm also a member of the selection panel for the Screen Innovation Production Fund, which has the responsibility of allocating \$230,000 New Zealand (U.S. \$122,000) to emerging film makers.

NEJE: *Just like you were 10 years ago.*

Bill: Exactly.

—L.W.

If you have any questions for Ronni or Bill, you can contact them at Veronica@Raconteur.co.nz.