

THE WRITE LIFE

Rayda Jacobs

Taking the leap from writer to film documentarian wasn't something I thought about too much, since I consider myself to be a storyteller rather than just a writer. As such, I have an open canvass and should be able to tell my stories on celluloid, as well as on the page. I'd had no idea before it happened, though, that I would foray into this area.

It came about after writing a series of articles for the Cape Times' One City Many Cultures initiative on the rites of passage in the different faiths. The campaign had been a huge success, and people came up to me saying, "I didn't know this about the Hare Krishnas, or that about the Muslims or the Jews." By this time, I had discovered that this was not a reading culture, but that even the poorest person had a television set. I wanted to reach everyone.

My areas of interest have always been culture, identity, and religion, which led me to the idea for a half-hour documentary on children of different faiths, talking about God. **I knew what I wanted to see visually, but had no idea how to go about it.** Sometimes, however, ignorance works in your favour because if you don't know the pitfalls you just charge ahead and deal with the disappointments as they come. Had I known then what I know now though, I might have hesitated, or taken a more conservative route. When I made that first call to etv, I did not even know that the person who makes decisions about documentaries was called a commissioning editor.

In any event, I soon found out that it is very difficult for an independent filmmaker, especially one with no experience. The commissioning editor told me she liked the idea, but who would be my producer? What films had I made?

I did not have any answers, and said I would get back to her. I spoke to one or two people in the industry. **I asked if I could see what a budget for a half-hour documentary looked like. This was not so much to know how much money it would roughly take, but to see what I would really need to do.** I would need a cameraman, a sound technician, an editor, a director, and a producer to put the whole thing together. I couldn't do the first three, but decided to produce and direct.

I wrote a script, and then went around to schools and temples and churches and madressahs and the townships. I found the most delightful children. I visited them twice, to get them used to me, before I came with the crew. There was a limited amount of funds; I could only afford the crew for four days. I would shoot, for instance, in Langa on Sunday

morning, take the crew for lunch in Rondebosch, change my clothes in the restaurant toilet, and shoot the Hare Krishnas in the afternoon.

No one had commissioned me. I was making the film with my own money, hoping that it would be good enough to interest a network. The woman at etv had cancelled appointments with me eight times.

The next step was editing. I had the films transferred to VHS and for three weeks sat on my couch, writing down time codes of the scenes I would use. I found an editing suite where they were prepared to give me a break on the cost. Even then I could only afford five days. When the programme was complete, I called up the woman at etv, and told her where I was and that I had the six segments on the different faiths – was she interested in taking a look. Today, of course, I would never presume to do such a thing. Editors don't come out to look at your work, but such was my naivety.

She came. She took a position on the couch, and I ran the first segment. The screen faded to black. She said nothing. The second segment. Still she said nothing. The third, fourth, fifth and sixth. Not a word. I thought, "ya Allah, how arrogant can you be Rayda Jacobs?. This woman can say no thanks, and you would've banked your whole R24,000 on your ego."

She got up, stretched, and said, "I'll take them all." My brother, the editor and I waited for her to be outside before we all shouted.

God Has Many Names was shown on etv over three years. My next film, *Portrait of Muslim Women*, was also done without a prior commission, but was immediately picked up by SABC for the *Issues of Faith* series. By this time, a Norwegian friend of mine had given me R100,000 for my own camera, video capture card and editing lessons, and I was learning all aspects of filming.

I took the camera with me on a book tour to the Caribbean last year, and shot *9/11 Muslims in the Americas* on four islands and in the streets of New York. The commissioning editor for *Expressions* thought it was fresh and well done, but said it was outside of their brief, and recommended it to *Special Assignment*. They also told me that it was outside of their brief, which was Africa, South Africa, and the Middle East. Didn't the events of September 11th have roots in the Middle East? But this is the way it goes.

I've made six documentaries, all of which have been purchased by libraries and some schools. **The film that took almost two years, gave me sleepless nights and emptied my pockets was *The Tuan of Antonie's Gat*.**

It was the story of a sultan who'd been captured by the Dutch in the 1700's, smuggled into the Cape and was locked up in a jail in the old

Residency (Simon's Town jail). From there, he escaped to a cave called Antonie's Gat along the coastline. His spirit still dwelled in the cave.

The story was about kramats and kitaabs, and to some extent dealt with the metaphysical. Many things went wrong, and not only with the actual shooting and editing of the film. Once the project disappeared completely from the hard drive and twice I had to cut the film from scratch. Then there were the strange happenings at the cave; the camera starting to record on its own, and the waves coming from nowhere to hit me. I had been told that the Tuan had "chosen" me to do the film. If this was so, why were all these things happening? It was a troubling time. My family told me not to continue with it, but the story kept crying out to me, and I went back to it. The film went through several transformations, including being lengthened from a half-hour to one-hour. It was screened at the Joseph Stone. The libraries have bought over 40 copies.

My last film, *The Legacy of Muhammad*, is presently being considered by SABC. However, I've already been told that they've licensed a similar film from overseas to be shown over the hajj period.

I will go on hajj, Inscha Allah, in December of this year. I hope to take my camera and capture the experience of the six people in my group. I ask for your du'ahs that Allah might accept my hajj, and return me safely to my family, Inscha Allah.

Pull Quotes:

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