

O Brother, Art Thou? The Story of Rob Hamill

Peter Calder

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Peter Calder on the documentary of Rob Hamill's solemn journey to Cambodia where his brother was killed by the Khmer Rouge

Filmmaker Annie Goldson calls Rob Hamill her secret weapon. The Whakatane-born 47-year-old is most widely known for having won, with Phil Stubbs, a rowing race across the Atlantic Ocean in 1997 - it took them a day under six weeks - which is, to put it mildly, the mark of a good keen man. And, says Goldson, he lends a lustre to her latest film that attracts the attention of men.

"Husbands and boyfriends are usually dragged to these sorts of films by women," she says, "but Rob is so masculine and also so emotionally open, he allows men to be more emotional."

The film under discussion is *Brother Number One*, Goldson's unsensational and heart-wrenching documentary about Hamill's 2009 journey to Cambodia on the trail of his murdered brother Kerry.

The official reason for his visit is to testify at the war crimes tribunal trying those involved in the genocidal Khmer Rouge regime led by Pol Pot in the 1970s.

The film includes spine-chilling official footage of the scene in court when Hamill comes face-to-face with Kang Kek Iew, aka Comrade Duch, who presided over the prison where Kerry died. And as he speculatively uncovers what happened to Kerry, who was picked up after inadvertently sailing into Cambodian waters, imprisoned and tortured to death, he bears witness to the horrors wrought on the Cambodian people at large.

The film is the latest - and best - in an extraordinary trio of documentaries by Goldson, who was last year promoted to a professorship in the Department of Film, Television and Media Studies at the University of Auckland. In 1999's *Punitive Damage*, she followed the story of New Zealander Helen Todd's law suit against an Indonesian general after her son, Kamal, was shot dead in the Dili massacre in East Timor in 1991; the fascinating *An Island Calling* (2003) dug beneath the 2001 murder in Fiji of John Scott - famous as the Red Cross go-between in the hostage crisis during the 2000 coup - and his partner Greg Scrivener.

Those films and *Brother Number One* are a handful of a 20-year output of films that have in common a strong critical perspective and an unabashed political engagement, but are

quite devoid of shrill polemic: rage may impel the story being told but the storytelling is exquisitely, even excruciatingly restrained.

"I want to raise issues and have people think about history and where we are because often that contains the seeds of solution. It is like going behind the headlines: what was the perfect storm that created the Khmer Rouge - it was a complex history that involved China and the Cold War and a peasantry that had been oppressed and the Vietnam War. And then a young hippie sails right into the middle. So the Hamill family's loss, which was huge, becomes a way of looking into this perfect storm."

With a tenured position and a professorial salary, Goldson occupies a somewhat privileged position among local documentarians, many of whom live from hand to mouth. But the model of academic as filmmaker is common in the US, she says, which is where she came of age as a filmmaker.

She had headed off to New York in the early 1980s, "tagging along" with the legendary experimental theatre group Red Mole, and ended up studying film at NYU and later teaching at Ivy League Brown University - where one of her classes included "Diana Ross' twins, Ringo Starr's girlfriend's daughter and Rory, son of Bobby, Kennedy".

"Since then I have always been an academic, writing books and articles, but trying to really straddle the divide between production and theory. I did initially feel a pressure because universities weren't particularly receptive to production work - it was seen as craft and they took the view that 'we're not going to give you money to go and watch TV'. But now my films are considered as research output, which is only right. It's just like literature anyway because it reflects us back to ourselves just as literature does."

For all that, she says, it can still be hard to fit in to academia.

"I'm in the Faculty of Arts, but I sometimes feel that I'm more like a scientist: I work with equipment, deal with big budgets, it's a collaborative process, and so on. So it sometimes feels like being a square peg in a round hole."

Goldson's arrival in the Big Apple could hardly have been better timed. A science graduate with a journalism diploma (she worked at Radio New Zealand for a short time) she would otherwise probably have followed her passion for making pictures into television journalism.

"I always had a yearning for the alternative and political and formally challenging, of which I knew very little, but it was just very hard in the early 80s in New Zealand to train as a filmmaker. At NYU it was a new discipline.

"It was a good time: video had just become available as a retail technology, though mainly used by politicised groups such as minorities finding their own voice and avant-garde artists. It was a powerful and productive fusion and I taught myself filmmaking in the streets."

Rob Hamill tells a story about Annie Goldson, the filmmaker he knows: the tiny *Brother Number One* crew was in Phnom Penh, about to film Rob's arrival at Tuol Sleng, the infamous high-school-turned-prison where as many as 20,000, including Kerry Hamill, died. He was really dithering that day, Goldson remembers, and finding it hard to step over the threshold.

"I was really upset," says Rob Hamill. "And she said to me 'We don't have to do this now. We can come back, do it another day'. I knew how tight the schedule was and how hard it had been to arrange and we actually couldn't do it another day. But for me that was Annie Goldson."

Goldson smiles when the story is relayed to her.

"He's a very engaging man," she says at last, "and we got on very well. But the material was sometimes very emotional and I had to decide whether to push him or take him away and comfort him. Do you keep filming when someone is distressed for the sake of good footage?"

"You never forget that you are dealing with real lives. You have to be mindful of that."

Plainly, the director regards her subject as a star.

"His story sounds depressing but Rob really is an inspiring character. All the time he had to think: this man I'm talking to could be one of the men who tortured my brother to death. He could have been bitter but he never was.

"And the Cambodians loved him. They embraced him as fellow victim, and were thrilled that he was a sports star and amazed he'd come so far. They were amazed to that he had the courage to confront Duch that Cambodians do not have."

In July, 2010, Comrade Duch was found guilty of crimes against humanity, torture, and murder and sentenced to 35 years' imprisonment. The sentence was extended on February 2, 2012 to life, without parole and with no chance of appeal.

Lowdown

Who: Annie Goldson, filmmaker

What: *Brother Number One*, opens March 8, documenting Kiwi sportsman Rob Hamill's journey to Cambodia searching for answers about his murdered brother Kerry.

On the web: www.brothernnumberone.co.nz

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