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Interview with Peter Entell - U.S film director living in Founex

On the 6th March, the film “A Home Far Away”, is set to be screened in cinemas across Switzerland. There will also be an avant-premiere in Nyon on 5th of March. This film is mainly set in and around the Nyon area and was reviewed after it was shown at the 2012 Visions du Reel film festival.

In the second in our series of “Afternoon Tea with.. ” we spoke to Peter Entell, the film’s director. In this first part of this interview we discover more about this award winning U.S documentary film maker who lives in Founex just outside Nyon. In the second part we focus on his films.

Entell, originally from New York first arrived in Switzerland in 1975 on August 1 - Swiss National Day.

“Everyone was dancing and singing and I thought, “everyone is so joyous, this is fun!” It was a great introduction to the country. I initially came over here because of a relationship, but then found work with U.N.H.C.R. (the United Nations Refugee Agency) as a sound recordist for their film department - we went to wherever there were refugee problems in the world.

I had really hit lucky with such a job. After studying anthropology at an American university, I went backpacking across Europe with a friend. At one stage during the trip, we were sat in a café in Italy and chatting about what we were going to do with our lives. We joked about being film makers (both of us being passionate about film), and yet here I was, in Switzerland just a few years later, doing exactly that. I was being paid to learn a craft, ride in jeeps in Africa, travel around the deserts of Somalia, and many other places. For such a young man this was a fabulous experience, although I could tell that some of the films that we were making were there purely to “sell” the U.N. and we had to gloss over or simply not mention situations that were going on in certain countries. There is no doubt I gained valuable film making experience during this period but when the Belgian-Zimbabwe Friendship Association asked me if I was interested in making a film (“Moving on : The Hunger for Land in Zimbabwe”) about the independence of Zimbabwe, their request came at the right time and I readily accepted”.

Generous people in film business

Previously Entell had only been working with sound and editing and had never actually directed a film, but after having spent seven years watching others, he felt he had picked up enough knowledge to be able to make his own. “There are some very generous people in the film industry, individuals who are willing to share their expertise with you”.

“Filming in Zimbabwe was extraordinary, I made several trips. I didn’t visit any of the usual tourist haunts, I lived in one area farmed by blacks whose farms were tiny little parcels of land, and then in the areas of white owned farms, their farms were made up of thousands of hectares, the country was going through a huge transition period at the time”.

Being an independent film director - one of the best jobs in the world

“For that first film I was on a huge learning curve, but it was my own. Being able to direct and be an independent film director is one of the best jobs in the world. You can choose your subject and how to cover it, plus you are usually with very talented people, and it can be a wonderfully creative process”.

After that first film in 1982, Entell travelled to the Inner Mongolia region of China and made three further films. “I learnt how to pitch for films, chase up proposals and source funding, to hustle and find out who would be interested in the subject matter. It’s a long, long process to getting a film made. You would think the process would be easier for me after all these years but it’s not. You may know more people and the door may open that little bit wider, but you still have to go through the whole rigmarole, you have to have a rock steady dossier, you still have to sell the film to people and convince them that you are the one to make it”.

Switzerland a paradise for making movies

“Having said that, it certainly helps living here, as Switzerland is a paradise for film making. There are so many structures that exist to help with financing. This is due in no small part to the film makers, who in the past have put pressure on politicians to support Swiss culture. “Swiss Films” the organisation in Zurich, gives advice to film makers and helps promote Swiss films abroad. There are lot of resources to help filmmakers at a federal, cantonal and a communal level”.

Unique to Switzerland

“There is also another mechanism that is unique to Switzerland. If you are lucky enough to sell your film to Swiss television, firstly you receive money from the sale, then from the royalties on the film, and also from an excellent system called “succès passage antenne”. Every time one of your films is played on any Swiss TV channel, money is put aside in an account to develop your next film. This can add up to a significant amount of money. So when I begin to work on a new film, I don’t have to start at zero. In addition there is “success cinema” - for every ticket bought by the cinema-going public, the film maker gets a portion too. This is all supported by the Swiss government. The Swiss are naturally very proud of their Swiss made films.

What’s next after “A Home Far Away”?

Entell says he put so much energy in to each film, (they usually take 3-4 years to make) he usually is devoid of new ideas for a while after, but now he does have a concept for his next project. “I won’t elaborate too much, but suffice to say the film is going to be about the reaction of human beings to other species in certain situations. It will be much more innovative and perhaps more provocative than anything I have done before. It will involve the use of tiny, micro cameras, the technology of these has evolved so much in the past few years it means I can explore this subject in more depth. I think the young generation will be whooping with excitement at the subject, the older generation probably may not like it, we shall see”.

Entell reflects "I hit lucky getting into the business when I did. Today there are thousands of great films out there, it can be hard for a film maker to distinguish their films between all the others. You have to be very solid and have lots of perseverance to work in this industry".

Entell is pleased that Nyon is host to Visions du Reel, the annual documentary film festival. "The town welcome filmmakers to this beautiful area, and we all get to watch extraordinary documentaries from around the world. When I'm not filming, I love hiking, skiing, and being part of local life. I don't think I would fit into New York life any more, I love it here. Nyon is home now.

Read on to hear more about some of Entell's other films - "Shake the Devil Off", "Josh's Trees", "Rolling", "A Home Far Away" and how he uses a cameraman who lives in Nyon for many of his films.

Tell us a little about your latest film set in the Nyon area

"A Home far Away" tells the story of U.S journalist Edgar Snow, the first to film and interview Mao Tse-tung. Suspected by the American authorities of communist sympathies, Snow and his actress wife Lois were blacklisted and together with their two children, moved to Switzerland and ended up living in Eysins. This film has actually been many years in the making, I know the family personally and was aware they had a lot archive material that I could use and I was waiting for the right time to use this material. Once I discovered that the house where they lived was about to be destroyed, I felt the right moment had come to make the film.

Note: readers will recognise a lot of scenes in and around the Eysins and Nyon area. You can listen to a more in depth radio interview about the making of this latest film www.ahomefaraway.com and you can read a review of the film.

If you look at your very first documentary "Moving on : The Hunger for Land in Zimbabwe" which was filmed (cut : in Zimbabwe) back in 1981, would you alter anything about it now?

"I'm still happy with it, I think it stands the test of time. I happen to hit on one of the central issues that the country is still dealing with today that is; who owns the land and who is feeding the country?"

Your first film was issue driven, but your later films are more character driven. Why the change?

"I began to think that politics is much more interesting on a very personal level, I think it's only through individuals that you can talk about issues, even in **"Moving on : The Hunger for Land in Zimbabwe"** I focussed on individuals; one black farmer and one white farmer to compare the two. For another film in Mongolia I followed a family of nomads throughout the seasons, how they lived and their relationship with the land and their animals".

Do the characters individuals in your film find you, or do you find them, how does it work?

"I usually find them but it can be bizarre sometimes how life works. For example, the back story to how my film "Shake the Devil Ofis interesting. Six months after Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans, a friend returned to her home there and she called me to say, "It's going to explode down here, this is not a natural disaster, this is a human disaster waiting to happen. You have got to come over". As I am my own producer and director, I didn't have to consult anyone as to whether I should go. I just went. Sometimes you just have to work like this, you have to react to an on-going situation, you cannot plan it. I hired an excellent camera man and a sound man, we travelled to the U.S and discovered my friend was right, we ended up in the middle of this incredible drama. The sound man had always worked on scripted films before where he knew the story was going and I had to explained we simply had to let the story develop on its own, we had to capture it as it was unfolding.

I was lucky too that the camera man (Jon Björgvinsson) I hired was available. He is a freelancer who lives in Nyon and travels globally for many TV stations. If there is a potential war developing or an earthquake etc, he will go anywhere at a moment's notice. I paid for him out of my own pocket for this film, I took the risk. Once the film was made, I was able to sell it to various TV stations. Although the film lists me as director of this film I actually directed nothing, the film directed itself, surprising situations cropped up during the entire period. Everything was impromptu, I had no idea what was going to happen. The film was received very well in the U.S.A. It had everything in it: conflict, a charismatic priest as the central character, lots of tension, colour, great singing, it had the a narrative curve of a novel. The film won prizes too, the subject matter in it was a hot issue. My gamble had paid off.

The two films you made "Josh's Trees" and "A Home Far Away" cover subjects in which you had a personal attachment to them. Was it harder to make such a film?

"Absolutely, I don't actually like being in front of the camera myself, but in the case of the film "Josh's Trees" I simply had to tell the story for his son. He had been my friend, the guy that I had been with in the Italian café all those years ago when we were young students, so after he died I knew I had to make the film. In doing so I had to ask some difficult questions, who am I in the film, how do I position myself? I also had to put in some narration even though I don't really like that. I find commentary a bit too directive, I rebel a bit with the concept of the audience needing everything explained, I don't think you need to take the audience by the hand. You should experience what's happening, not be told it.

Tell us about your 1998 film "Rolling" set in Lausanne

Lausanne is a mecca for roller skaters, it's a city of hills and thousands come to skate there. There was a small article in "L'Hebdo" magazine about the popular skaters. When I am not making my own films I also work as an independent producer for Swiss TV, so I called these skaters up and said "we are from Swiss TV, we want to make a film about roller skating and we want to meet you". We went along to a cafe in Lausanne, and all the skaters were sat around this one big table. So I asked them all to tell me a little bit about themselves. The last one to speak

was Ivano. He said “to be honest, I think you have heard enough good stories, you have plenty to choose from, I can’t add anything.” Of course this instantly got me intrigued and I knew he was the one to focus on. It turned out he had Italian ancestry, his parents had moved to Switzerland to work in a factory. Ivano didn’t want to follow in their footsteps, he was trying to avoid it at all costs, so skating for him was an escape. Skating made life exciting. When he skated he was travelling faster than the cars around him, he was being chased by police cars around the town, he skated anywhere and everywhere, even backwards down the banisters of stairs! Ivano went on to open a skating shop and he actually became quite famous at the time, you could see him modelling skating clothes in adverts, everyone knew him. But as often happens when you get close to a character, you realise there is often a back story and the narrative can change. I was interested about what would happen after the glory had faded because inevitably as Ivano grew older he wouldn’t always be at the top of his game, inevitably there would be a 16 year old who would take over his place, and that did indeed happen.