



By Tamara Krinsky

THE DOC SHOT Q&A: Megan Doneman, Director/Producer, 'Yes Madam, Sir'



Kiran Bedi, subject of Megan Doneman's 'Yes Madam, Sir.'

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THE DOC SHOT Q&A:

Snapshots of the work and lives of those creating and supporting non-fiction film.

The DOC SHOT Q&A is an exclusive online feature by Documentary magazine associate editor Tamara Krinsky. Through this mix of questions (some serious, some sassy) each DOC SHOT provides a glimpse into the work and lives of those creating and supporting nonfiction film.

Megan Doneman

Director/Producer- *Yes Madam, Sir*

YOUR FILM

Brief description of your film:

Yes Madam, Sir, a feature documentary filmed in India over six years, is a "David and Goliath" story. Narrated by Academy Award-winning actor Helen Mirren, the film portrays the life story Kiran Bedi, India's modern-day Gandhi, first woman police officer and the winner of Asia's equivalent of the Nobel Prize. Adored by the masses and vilified by her critics, she has publicly fought high-level corruption, feudalistic bureaucracies and brutal opposition, at great personal and professional cost.

Your role/credit on the film:

Producer (along with Laraine Doneman), director, editor, writer, cinematographer and all the other jobs you do when you don't have a crew...

How did you find your subject or become involved in the film?

My mother, Laraine Doneman, a regular visitor to India, told me about Kiran Bedi when I was 13 years old. Over a decade later, as an adult I found myself working in the film industry on studio films as an assistant editor. I had directed two short films and was searching for a feature to develop. Around the same time I saw Kiran Bedi feature in an interview, which explored the historical and revolutionary reforms she introduced as head of Asia's largest and most notoriously corrupt prison, Tihar Jail. I was mesmerized. Laraine and I managed to track down Kiran's e-mail address, and I began proposing to shoot a documentary feature film on her life story. We corresponded for a few months until I had a break in between working on films. I flew to India, bought a camera duty-free at the airport and read the instruction manual on the plane. Laraine met me in Mumbai, and together we caught the overnight train to Delhi, where we were robbed of everything. We showed up on Kiran's doorstep with nothing but the camera I had purchased-I had chained it to my train seat. We met with Kiran that day and she immediately invited me into her home to begin. After 15 years of turning down other filmmakers, she chose to go with an unknown filmmaker from Australia. I was slightly wishing she would send me packing on my way that day, as I had a sense I was in for a long, brutal haul. I had no crew, no funding and no idea how I was going to pull it off.

Was there a moment in this film that went a different way than you expected?

I am so happy that the film has turned out similarly to how I originally envisioned, in that I wasn't interested in doing a "talking heads" piece. My background is drama, not journalism. I wanted to make a dramatic, cinematic documentary. In terms of my approach in the editing room, that never changed. Probably the biggest change that came from the editing room was my decision to use voiceover; I had tried for the longest time not to. I thought it would somehow "cheapen" the storytelling process. After condensing 500 hours of footage to four hours, there were still so many questions in the story that couldn't alone be answered through the scenes merely playing out. Narration brought clarity to the storytelling of *Yes Madam, Sir*, and it was also a great way to truncate the story. The film covers 15 years of Bedi's life. Then we were fortunate enough to secure Academy Award-winning actor Helen Mirren to voice the narration.

If you had had an extra \$10,000 to spend on your film, what would you have used it for?

I wish I were more noble and say I'd spend it making the film better, but I'd probably spend it on throwing a huge party for all the amazing people who helped me over the years-especially my friends and family. Then I'd go on a holiday to recover....

What excites you about playing your film at the Toronto International Film Festival?

Obviously TIFF is a major festival, and it's an honor to have our film selected. But more important, it means the film is completed. And further, it means that people are actually going to see it. The hardest thing about making a film totally independently, outside of the industry, is that the whole time you are asking yourself two questions: Am I ever going to finish it, and is anyone ever going to see it? These questions almost drove me insane.

If you've had time to check out the TIFF catalogue, is there a particular film (aside from yours) or event at the Festival that you're looking forward to attending?

Definitely the other feature docs; I have the greatest respect for anyone who attempts to make a feature doco. Also, the Coen brothers have a film showing called *Burn After Reading*; they always make such interesting choices in their approach to their stories. Whether you're into their stories, the way they tell them is always deeply compelling.

YOUR WORK

What's the first film you remember seeing as a child?

I don't know if it was the first film I saw, but it is one of the first films I remember seeing-one of the first Dracula films, called *Nosferatu*. It absolutely terrified and haunted me for weeks after seeing it.

Tell us about a film that affected you profoundly or changed/inspired the way you do your own work.

I remember at the time being shocked by the notion that moving images on the screen portraying a fictitious story could have such a deep emotional impact, and for weeks and weeks. I remember when I was filming *Yes Madam, Sir*. I would shoot for hours, and of course captured a lot of inane footage. But I always instantly knew when I had "something" during these hours of filming. If the images I saw through my viewfinder were emotionally stirring me in some way, and started ticking something over in my mind as to the possibility of where the footage could fit into this as yet incomplete and untold story, that was always a solid indicator.

What would surprise people the most about your job or the way you execute it?

I think they would be/are surprised by how much work is involved in making a film, how many skills you are constantly drawing on, and how much tenacity and stamina you need. I know this because people would constantly ask me over the years, "Have you finished that little film on that Indian woman yet??" Even bad films take a hell of a monumental amount of work. To make a good film, without much of a crew or industry support? Fairly impossible.

When you are feeling creatively stumped or burnt out, what do you do to get the creativity flowing again?

Work in a different way. Do the same thing, but employ different tools. I remember when I edited the movie down from 500 hours to 4.5 hours. I had lost my freshness, was really attached to certain scenes, and couldn't imagine how I was going to condense it further. Then I remember reading Aristotle's *The Poetics for Screenwriters*. It said, Never be a slave to anything but the story you are telling. Well, I knew I had become a slave to the footage I had filmed over the years, and the scenes I had edited for months and months. So, I kept working on condensing the story, but not in my edit suite. I transcribed my whole film, and chose to keep working through writing in script form. When that got a bit tired, I worked with scene cards. When that grew tired, I jumped back in the edit suite. I kept condensing the story, but kept switching between different methods to achieve that.

Another great way to see your film fresh is to see it through others' eyes, vicariously. I would often invite friends around for the weekend and have a screening. I always watched it differently with them, as opposed to watching it by myself. When I got it down to 2.5 hours, I thought I was finished. Then I had a screening with a few friends; they all agreed it was still too long. I remember not agreeing with them. So I decided to have a test screening with a big audience-300 people. Well, nothing will tell you faster that your movie is too long, or highlight better the parts that aren't working. The audience doesn't even have to tell you; you can feel it instantly. And of course, we got them all to fill out feedback forms at the end; they were fairly unanimous. There are lots of ways to assist yourself during the storytelling process that help you reach the same goal.

YOUR LIFE

Daily essential read (online or off)?

Sydney Morning Herald newspaper.

What's on your TIVO or iPod right now?

Always Jeff Buckley, and usually whatever cinema soundtrack music I am editing with at the time. Am loving Mychael Danna's *Water* soundtrack right now.

What do you want more of in your life?

Equanimity.

What do you want less of in your life?

Stress.

If you could add an extra hour to every day, how would you spend it?

Not working.

What do you want for your birthday?

Why, are you gonna buy me a gift?

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