

Perspective: the filmmaker's point of view



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Glitterboys and Ganglands

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Glitterboys and Ganglands is acclaimed writer, Lauren Beukes', debut documentary on the Miss Gay Western Cape competition in Cape Town.

I was privileged enough to work with Lauren and Matthew on this documentary. We had a fairly tight deadline by the time Lauren phoned me and I think the fact that I edited during the day and Matthew sometimes at night made it a varied product. The edit is a combination of all our efforts and work, and in the end, every single person who walked into the edit suite gave input. While Lauren was on tour for her book *Zoo City*, I caught up with her via email.

WHY DID YOU DECIDE TO DO A DOCUMENTARY ON MISS GAY WESTERN CAPE? WHY DID YOU WANT TO TELL THIS STORY?

LAUREN (L): We have a list of dream projects and one of them was a documentary on Miss Gay Soweto, but that hasn't run for a few years. We got wind of Miss Gay Western Cape – which is the biggest in the province – at a moment when we had the spare time and resources to do it. It was pure serendipity.

YOUR THREE MAIN CHARACTERS ARE REALLY SPECIAL, BUT ALSO VERY DIVERSE. IT WAS INCREDIBLE THAT THEIR PERSONAL STORIES DOVETAILED SO NEATLY WITH THE BUILD-UP TOWARDS THE MISS GAY WESTERN CAPE EVENT AND THE OUTCOME. HOW DID YOU ACHIEVE THIS?

L: As a long-time journalist, I've learnt that the stories find you – it's all about finding the right people. I was able to interview all the girls at one of the events running up to the big night and I chose the three people who seemed to have the most interesting stories (and a fourth who was moslem, but also hadn't come out to her parents yet – so after we discussed it, we decided rather not to feature her as one of our main stories). The way it turned out

was again, pure serendipity. It just so happened that one of our girls won, one lost (badly) and one was a surprise top five!



Eva Torez at Miss Gay Western Cape

THE ENTIRE DOCUMENTARY WAS SHOT AND EDITED IN QUITE A SHORT PERIOD.

WHAT CHALLENGES DID YOU FACE?

L: I was lucky to work with experienced and brilliant editors, Izette Mostert and Matthew Brown (who edited the pageant scenes). When you came in, we had the core story down, but it sagged in places and just wasn't working in others. You brought your 15 years of experience to bear to make subtle tweaks and rearrangements that made all the difference. A good editor is able to instantly see what's working and how to fix it without stepping on the story. We did have major issues with audio syncing using the Canon 7D and eventually our long-suffering and very tolerant assistant editor, Dene McLeod, had to manually sync the entire thing.

YOU ARE A HUSBAND-WIFE TEAM, HOW DID THIS WORK? WOULD YOU SAY IT WAS AN ADVANTAGE?

L: We've worked together for the last five years at the now defunct Clockwork Zoo where Matt was director/producer and I was head scriptwriter and occasional director. Look, it always helps when you're sleeping with the boss! In all seriousness, our working relationship plays off our strengths. We push each other and probably give each other more grief than you would a co-worker you weren't married to.

ALTHOUGH IT'S A LIGHT HEARTED FILM THAT KEEPS YOU SMILING, YOU TOUCHED SOME HEAVY SUBJECTS LIKE POVERTY, RAPE, HOMOSEXUALITY AND HIV and AIDS. HOW DID YOU MANAGE TO KEEP IT POSITIVE AND NOT BE DRAGGED DOWN BY THESE HEAVY ISSUES?

L: By letting the subjects speak for themselves and, of course, choosing great subjects in the

first place. The pageant is just a wonderful thing: a celebration of who they are (or choose to be sometimes). So really we just filmed what happened in a way that was both respectful and fun and let it veer into the darker moments naturally. It was about sharing their stories without dwelling on the darkness and always picking up the mood after.



Kat Gilardi at Miss Gay Western Cape

YOU ALSO EDITED ON THE FILM – HOW DID YOU FIND SHARING THE EDIT SUITE?

MATTHEW (M): It was actually pretty cool – I didn't have to cut the content so much as the music theme pieces. I like to work on my own, so we took turns during the day or I worked at night. But one of the challenges was the way we had shot sound and picture separately and the syncing software was a complete lemon. I lost weeks of my life that I won't get back through trying to sync the sound.

THIS IS NOT A COMMISSIONED DOCUMENTARY – HOW DID YOU FUND IT AND WHAT CHALLENGES DID YOU FACE?

M: We were very lucky that Okuhle Media agreed to invest in the film and gave us financial support from an early stage. We managed to keep hard costs down as much as possible to allow us to break even sooner. We also signed the distribution rights to DCD Rights (a distribution company) from London and we're hoping for some solid sales.

AS WE ALL KNOW, YOU ARE ACTUALLY A FICTION WRITER! WHY DID YOU DECIDE ON THE DOCUMENTARY GENRE AS YOUR FILMMAKING DEBUT?

LAUREN: I've been a lot of things, but always first and foremost a storyteller. I was a freelance journalist for 12 years, a TV scriptwriter for five and I've been writing books for six. It was a natural evolution. It's about finding great stories and telling them in a compelling way. Journalism was the best training ground I could have asked for in fiction writing or documentary directing. I had previously directed episodes of the animated series, URBO: The Adventures of Pax Afrika, but making a documentary was a return to my journalism roots.

WHAT DID YOU FIND THE MOST CHALLENGING ASPECT OF FILMMAKING IN COMPARISON TO WRITING FOR A MAGAZINE OR A BOOK?

L: Not being able to rearrange quotes to make them fit where I wanted them! In journalism, you can move a quote to a different part of the story where it will have the most impact (in context, of course), but in documentaries, you have to keep it in scene. We had the most amazing quote from Eva about how she wanted to get into genetically modified (GM) foods in her biotech studies and that GM foods, like being gay, is something that is misunderstood, that people fear, but it came up early in the shoot and there was just. no. way. to. make. it. fit. You and I must have tried twenty variations and eventually we had to give up. I'm all for killing all your darlings (and mostly you never notice when they're gone) but that one hurt.



Eva Torez at Work

WHO DO YOU THINK WILL ENJOY THIS FILM?

L: Really, and I know this is a glib answer, everyone. I think some people might watch it for the spectacle of seeing men in heels and evening frocks, but what they'll ultimately come away with is, as Eva so beautifully summed up, the idea that, "we're here and it's normal and we're lovely."

YOU'RE A BUSY WOMAN, HAVING WON THE ARTHUR C CLARKE AWARD FOR SCIENCE FICTION FOR YOUR BOOK *ZOO CITY* AND NOW YOU'RE JET SETTING ON A PUBLICITY CAMPAIGN. HOW DO YOU MANAGE SUCH A SCHEDULE?

L: I have a very supportive husband who makes me turn down a lot of fun stuff that would be very time consuming to focus on the big projects, a brilliant nanny and friends and family who keep me down to earth.

Interviewed by **Izette Mostert**