

FILM AUSTRALIA'S IMMIGRATION DVD

Interview with James Ricketson & Blagica Tonveska Questions by Paul Byrnes

Q: James, can you tell me what *Roslyn and Blagica* was meant to be about? How did the project get started?

JR: A long time ago, I was asked if I would like to make a film about a special friendship between two young children from different ethnic backgrounds. That was the brief, basically. I went to, what turned out to be, a wonderful school with a wonderful headmaster, where ninety or a hundred different nationalities were represented. I went into a classroom and met lots and lots of young girls. The two people that stood out most to me when we sat and talked together were Roslyn and Blagica, who seemed to be so naturally in love with each other, as eleven-year-old friends are. There was really no question that they should be the ones that I would make the film about.

Q: Blagica, what do you remember about that first meeting?

BT: I remember the teacher telling us that they wanted to do a movie about friends and sitting in a room and being asked questions. I was thinking about who they wanted to do it and I was probably sitting there thinking that half of these people aren't really true, true friends. But I thought they're not going to pick me, and they did.

Q: Were you happy to be in it?

BT: I was happy but I think I felt privileged because someone asked me to do it because we really were close friends. It felt right that we should do it, I suppose.

Q: Tell us about your background and how old you were.

BT: I was eleven and we came from Yugoslavia. At home we spoke Yugoslav, ate Yugoslav food and all that sort of stuff. When we went out, at school, we tried to do all the Australian things but we were always taught to be proud of who we are and where we come from.

Q: In the film you're actually very animated.

BT: Looking at the film the other day my husband said to me, 'I thought you were a shy child?' And I was very, very shy. How talkative I was really surprises me and I think that it shows that [James Ricketson] was able to catch us the way we were as friends — we would speak to each other rather than to a camera or to someone that we didn't know.

Q: What do you remember about the making of the film?

JR: One thing I remember about making the film is the headmaster, who I thought, was a remarkable person. I don't know whether he's still alive or not. I just thought his philosophy of education was wonderful. The little bits and pieces that are there in the film at the moment reveal that. I remember being very touched by this wonderful friendship between these two young girls from different ethnic backgrounds. I was touched by the whole school actually because, as you see in the film, there are black faces and representatives of so many

different nationalities, all seemingly getting on perfectly well with each other — they hadn't yet learnt that they weren't supposed to get on well with each other.

Q: Was this a burning political issue at the time?

JR: I don't think it was. I don't think that the term multiculturalism had even been invented yet, it certainly wasn't in current usage. SBS, to my understanding, was only about one year old, maybe even less than one year in 1979. I suspect it's probably one of the earlier self-consciously multicultural films. Although, obviously from your research, you've found stacks of others about the same kind of question.

Q: I'm wondering what you thought you might get from this idea?

JR: I don't know. I guess in all of my life I thought the differences between people are minuscule and the things that people share in common are so profound. We're all born, we all die, we all get married, we all fall in love, we all fall out of love, we all suffer tragedies and so on. Those things unite us and, in a way, they unite children even more because they don't have the intellectual capacity yet to understand that because you're a Muslim and I'm a Christian, there is a history that means that we can't be friends. I guess I've never really felt that there was a huge difference between people based on their skin colour, creed, faith or politics. And the school was a kind of a reflection of what I believed to be the ideal of all possible schools. I'm sure that if I looked a bit deeper there were probably things about that school that were not so great, but it seemed to be an era of much greater tolerance than the one that we're living through now.

Q: Blagica, can you tell us about your friendship with Roslyn?

BT: It lasted from year three to year six at school. We met when we started at primary because we both had to change school from infants to primary, and we were basically close friends all the way through.

Q: Did you think that you were acting?

BT: No, not once. The teachers told us to be natural. They told the whole school to just go ahead and do what you normally do. I think that comes from [the director] too, just being comfortable with who we are. We just went ahead and did what we did. I think once you came to film us walking to school. I mean that's something we did every day, just a natural thing to do. I think we forgot the cameras were there. I mean you could probably vouch for that more than me. We just went on and did what we had to do and play as we played.

Q: James, were there specific things that you had in mind that you might be able to achieve?

JR: Well, it's probably a terrible generalisation but I think that any documentary that you make is, in one way or another, trying to break down barriers of misunderstanding between people. To give the audience access to some element of another person's or other people's humanity that they haven't had access to before. I guess what I was looking for was a glimpse into the friendship that I had witnessed on the first day when I met these girls, so that the audience could actually get a glimpse of that friendship also. [So the audience might] realise that, at least amongst eleven-year-old girls in this particular school, there was no barrier erected because of differences of culture or religion.

Q: How did you approach shooting the film?

JR: It's hard to remember twenty-six years ago, but I remember doing everything I possibly could to make the girls feel relaxed. As a filmmaker I've got my whole bag of tricks, of course, to try and make people feel relaxed. I don't remember what it was I said but I knew the last image that I wanted for the film. I wanted you to fall into each other's arms. I remember saying something funny or something stupid in order to get that moment. I think that I was probably being silly and that was one of the ways of getting to the girls, to be silly in the way a dad or an uncle might be silly, so they feel comfortable around you, not confronted. [The subject is] not confronted by an interviewer that's asking academic questions, just someone who's become a quick friend who you can joke with.

BT: I think that came across in the film actually. As I said, I was surprised that I was quite comfortable speaking openly and in what I said because I was very, very shy. I wouldn't have done it if I wasn't comfortable. I didn't feel I was doing something unnatural. It happened, in a way.

Q: Did you and Roslyn talk about making the film between yourselves?

BT: I don't remember, it just went on and we were friends. We played, we went to school, we had fun, and that was it. When the film was done, life continued.

Q: What did your parents think about it?

BT: Well, my parents worked long hours at that time, so they weren't even there. They left very early in the morning and the afternoon, but they thought it was a lovely idea and they were happy for us to do it.

JR: Did they see the film?

BT: I don't think they ever did, you know.

JR: Are they still alive?

BT: Yeah, both of them are still alive.

JR: It would be interesting to see what they think of it now.

BT: I'll actually show them soon.

Q: James, did you actually talk to [Blagica's parents]? Did you have to go and ask them for permission?

JR: I don't think so. I know I went round to Roslyn's house one day but I don't think that was to ask permission for anything.

BT: I think the teachers actually sent a note home and asked if the parents would allow this to happen.

JR: That was back in a much more innocent time, when you could just do things informally and casually and there wasn't the suspicion that there might be something untoward going on. It is not that way these days.

Q: Blagica, did you have a sense of what the purpose of the film was?

BT: You know, to tell you the truth, I don't think I really did. To us, as you said, people are people and I think I even said something similar in the film. It didn't matter whether you were black, Chinese, or whatever; you were just friends. To us [taking part in the film] was just being filmed as friends. I didn't fully take on the whole concept of it because I never thought of it that way. We never thought we were different to each other. We just enjoyed each other's company and we were happy to talk about what we did and who we were.

Q: And yet you didn't stay in touch with Roslyn?

BT: No. She moved on the following year. I suppose as young kids with parents working late, you can't always just go off and see [your friend]. It was probably that innocent, you couldn't just go [and visit]. I couldn't go down to North Sydney from where I lived easily. It wasn't within walking distance or whatever, which is a shame.

Q: Did you have a screening at the school?

JR: I don't think so.

BT: No, I don't remember one. The first time I think I saw it was when it went on *The Mike Walsh Show*.

Q: What was your experience of seeing the film?

BT: We were at home and we saw it being shown on *The Mike Walsh Show* on TV, that was my first experience seeing it.

Q: What did you think?

BT: As just a little kid, you think: 'Oh, gee I'm on TV!', and that's about it. It wasn't a big issue to us. We were friends and that was it. That was the most important thing, we were friends. I forget everything else because it never came up.

Q: How long had you been in Australia then?

BT: We came out when I was two years old, so nine years.

Q: Were you conscious that you were a migrant?

BT: I was. In the film, they [other students] kept saying, 'Yugoslavs, who needs them?'. Funnily enough, I don't remember that being said to me until I think back, earlier on it did happen a fair bit. Not a great amount, but it happened. It obviously had an impact on me because I repeated it. I don't remember much now because later, when I went to high school, there wasn't much of that being said anymore.

Q: Do you think things have changed?

BT: I think so. We talk to our children. We've never, ever had an issue where someone's called them names they used to use, like wogs and what have you. If anything they like to say it to each other jokingly, as terms of endearment but that's about it. It's not an issue with them at all. At least, they've never come home and said so. I think people are quite happy to experience other cultures, enjoy other cultures, food, and all of that stuff. I suppose if you look at all the restaurants and the different types of food, people are taking it on board and enjoying it.

Q: James, tell us how old you were and the experience you'd had at that time?

JR: I'd been to the Australian Film and Television School for the interim year at the film school. I'd been making films for about three or four years. I was twenty-six years old and this was my fourth or fifth documentary.

Q: What was the response to the film afterwards?

JR: I don't know, my recollection's a bit like Blagica's. I just remember it as such a little film. It was about two day's work to film and a week of editing. It seemed just a little moment in my life, which has become something different now, twenty-six years later. It was such a small thing that I didn't really think much about it, except that I really did enjoy it. I enjoyed making the film and when I think of my documentaries, it's probably one of my best because it's such a simple idea and, I think, very well done for a simple idea.

Q: You wouldn't be sitting here if it wasn't.

JR: No, I guess not. The reason why it's a good documentary is because of the talent. I had something to do with it, but the talent is what made it good.

Q: Blagica, can you describe what you were like at eleven?

BT: Very shy. Probably, I hated to see other people being tormented or upset, whether they were fat children or black children. We were never raised to be like that. We were raised to be sympathetic and understanding to everybody. I probably very often felt sad when we saw other people upset or tormented. And, I was just very shy and quiet.

Q: What's your memory of the school?

BT: Besides being good friends with Roslyn, I found the teachers were just wonderful. They were fantastic. A lot of them went further than just teaching, they almost became like your friends. They were concerned about you and interested in you, and that was lovely.

Q: Blagica, can you just tell us what you remember about getting recruited to act in the film?

BT: I remember the teachers saying that some people wanted to make a movie about friends from different backgrounds. I think it was to be one Australian and one whatever. I don't know whether we put our hands up, I think they picked us. I remember sitting in a room with [James Ricketson] and a few others, and they were asking questions and trying to get to know us. And, I suppose, trying to find a true and close friendship. Then they basically decided who they wanted to be in it.