

How Mugabe and the White African Was Made

Producers David Pearson and Elizabeth Morgan Hemlock on why they made the film

The story of Mike Campbell and this fight for justice and the return of law in Zimbabwe, immediately struck a chord with us and so immediately felt that it would with a wider audience, especially because Mike was fighting for Human Rights and against Racism. The fact that he was taking this action because his own President was the perpetrator of such actions and the story was based in Africa, it gave it a relevance and urgency that we don't come across very often. Our combined skills of David's filmmaking (he is also an award winning director himself) and Executive Producer's experience in many TV productions, and Elizabeth's producing and financing knowledge, coupled with our goals of making theatrical movies, we thought that we could bring something unique to Andy and Lucy's vision for the film. We wanted it to have a strong cinematic feel and look. Financially and creatively, we were willing to take the risk alongside our Directors and we were fortunate enough to secure the support of key financial partners of Molinare Productions and The Film Agency for Wales who had the courage to stay with us through the ever expanding shooting schedule due to Mugabe's election run offs and court battle postponements. We had an amazing crew with editor Tim Lovell and the excellent sound and grading team at Molinare bringing their magic to the finished film. Arturi Films have a slate of feature films in development, all of which are co-productions with other countries and yet their common strengths are that they enable the audience to go on an emotional journey with the characters in the story.

Directors Lucy Bailey and Andrew Thompson discuss the making of the film

Q: Why Mugabe and the White African?

We felt that the white farmers' story was one that was repeatedly overlooked, but really needed telling. The film serves as a window into what is happening in Africa right now. The SADC court case represents a watershed moment in Southern Africa, where Africa really has an opportunity to stand up and be counted. At its core it is a story of good versus evil, of justice, bravery and faith - things all of us can relate to and question from anywhere in the world.

Q: What did you want to achieve with Mugabe and the White African?

We wanted to tell a great emotional story. We wanted to make an engaging and compelling film that would attract the widest possible audience so as to get the message to people about what is really happening inside Zimbabwe.

Q: Is the white farmers' story particularly close to your heart?

It is now! It was always a story that we thought was interesting and had been undersold by the press. The deteriorating situation in Zimbabwe and what Robert Mugabe was doing there made us both furious, so it was something we talked about, but with no obvious 'in' to tell the story it could well have been another of those program 'ideas' that we talked about but which never materialised.

Q: How did you find out about the Campbell case?

We both travel extensively in Africa with work and on holiday. We heard about the case whilst in South Africa and we both looked at each other and thought, “ what a wonderful story”. When we got home we followed it up with various phone calls and eventually got an email address for Ben.

Q: What happened then?

We contacted Ben only weeks before he and Mike were due to go to Windhoek, Namibia for the first appearance in court. This provided an ideal opportunity to meet with them both in one place at the same time - and without us having to risk life and limb getting into Zimbabwe for the sake of a preliminary recce.

It was a huge gamble. Not only were we paying for expensive flights, accommodation and a brand new A1 camera, it clashed with other paid work we could otherwise be doing. And whilst we knew the story was strong, we also knew that if Mike and Ben were not strong enough and articulate enough as personalities, the film would be dead in the water.

The plan was to meet with Mike and Ben, see if we liked one another, gauge whether or not they would be effective in carrying the film and to get enough material shot to allow for a pilot tape to be assembled which we could use to show to Arturi Films back home, who we had already approached for advice with the hope that they would come on board as our producers and help to secure funding and broadcast interest.

Q What were some of the biggest challenges?

Filming in Zimbabwe ‘illegally’ particularly covering such a contentious subject, would almost certainly have lead to imprisonment, and we had to take risks but manage those risks as carefully as we could. The logistics of filming illegally meant our forward planning had to be watertight and for each trip. We always wanted to make a film that was well shot and crafted. A film with this level of high production values, filmed in a dangerous country with restrictions on what we could film, can’t just be shot from the hip. The team, producers David Pearson and Elizabeth Morgan Hemlock and ourselves, had many discussions about how to best cover the story and deal with the issues. We were also limited in what we could film while we were in Zimbabwe, as we were not supposed to be there! In an ideal world we could have included more Black Zimbabweans in the film, and to show just how much the farm invasions damage them too, but we had to limit filming to those who were comfortable to be included- as for many it was too dangerous for them to be associated with the film. In the end we think we did well to get as much coverage as we did.

With the court case being postponed as often as it was, and with the political situation in Zimbabwe being so fluid throughout 2008, we had to be ready to respond quickly to changing circumstances. Reconciling prior and paid professional commitments with the ever present prospect of needing to jump on the next available flight to Zimbabwe or Namibia or South Africa was tricky. Funding was also a major issue. Money, of course, was - and remains - a concern. We were routinely spending money we didn't yet have available to us. We couldn't

expect people to give their time for free on the project so, while we and our producers could heroically defer paying ourselves, it was absolutely essential that everyone else was paid.

Q: So did you instantly recognise the family's potential for carrying the film?

Yes, we did which was a huge relief. We have both been working in documentaries long enough to know when someone is going to be good on camera and Mike and Ben were spot on. The fact that they are also such great company was a wonderful bonus as well. In the aftermath of that initial trip we felt very positive that the 'characters' and 'story' were both strong and compelling and we had also shot enough material to cut together a short 4 minute pilot film.

Q: Where did Arturi Films come in?

As we were about to go and shoot the pilot. We had both known and worked with David Pearson for some time (we had had various 'near misses' involving other programme ideas with him). We had always really admired the 'Under the Sun' strand that he ran at the BBC with its contemporary anthropological documentary films shot around the world. David's business and producing partner in Arturi was Elizabeth Morgan Hemlock, who came with additional film financing and sales experience, which all fed into the vision of what the film could be in terms of its distribution. The fact that Arturi Films were small, independent and flexible suited a production like this perfectly.

At this early stage David was a great help in acting as a sounding board and giving encouragement and advice. Thankfully, they were both enthusiastic about the story and were willing to take on the risk of trying to make this film, alongside us, before financing could be secured. It gave us the confidence to go ahead with the recce and run around and book flights and buy cameras with money we didn't have.

Q: What came out of the 'pilot' film?

With our editor Tim Lovell, we cut a 4 minute pilot which worked well and gave people enough of an idea of the story and characters. Arturi took us in to meet with 'More 4' commissioner, Sandra Whipham, who offered to buy the UK TV Rights for the 'True Stories' strand. It was a great boost, but it also meant that the real work now had to begin in earnest... it was a point of no return.

Q: How did you get funding?

Initially we funded the start of the production ourselves. We were aware that raising finance amongst broadcasters and public funders for a subject matter as contentious as this would require experience and relationships that we didn't have, which is why we approached Arturi Films. Thankfully our producers secured some private investment, two public funding awards from the Film Agency for Wales and our post production deal with Molinare, enabling us to work with the team who did the post production work on last year's Oscar

winner, 'Man on Wire', to allow us to make a start on the film proper. Molinare have encouraged and supported us all the way through. Financially the film has been a huge gamble for all of us - and it still is.

Q: Aesthetically what did you seek to bring to the story?

The cinematography and sound had to be stylish and evocative, [Andrew is a cameraman] the visual look of the film is very important. Pictures and sound are what give a film its layers. So many TV productions today are shot with awful sound, so part of the challenge was to make an observational documentary film 'the old fashioned way' with craft technicians; camera, sound, editors. Many people in television today wouldn't think it possible to still make film this way. We hope we've demonstrated otherwise.

Q: The production incorporates a range of diverse locations around the world, was this a challenge?

We have, over the years, worked on many films that have taken us overseas, so filming in lots of different locations was never really an issue. However getting in and out of Zimbabwe safely - and with kit - was a bit lively at times! It wasn't so much the number of locations as the number of times we had to fly back and forth to the same locations! The court case kept being postponed so we ended up going out to Windhoek five times, Zimbabwe four times over the course of the year. It was a nightmare for our producers and ourselves to juggle the budget and financing for that around other work dates and life in general!

Q: Given the media restrictions in place in Zimbabwe, how did you get in and out with your equipment?

A lot of it is down to careful logistics - we were very careful with security at all times- but inevitably there were a few moments when things got a little hairy.

Q: What equipment did you use and how did this determine the way the film was produced?

[Lucy]: "Because Andrew is such a camera snob, he would only use a large format camera. He owns a DSR 450 camera which he used with HD lenses. We shot 25p. Some of the Zimbabwe footage was shot on a DSR 570 at 50i with a camera body hired in from VE Projects. We left Ben and Mike with a Sony A1 camera with which to shoot footage on the farm in our absence. It was generally passed around the farming community and this was invaluable in getting material that we'd never have got with the larger camera."

Q. How Did You Edit the Film?

Our editor was Tim Lovell whom Lucy had worked with previously on the Comic Relief appeal films. As an editor, he is an outstanding storyteller. He also has his own Avid suite at home, so we cut in his front room. There were lots of dogs, children and, towards the end Lucy had to go into hospital and then there was a new baby in tow too! We wanted people to watch the film and feel what it was like to be in the Campbell's position and see what they had to go through, and we did not want to use commentary, but with so many rushes on a story spread out over year, and with multiple setbacks in court it was quite a task to make the story flow. With David's input we decided during the editing to increase Ben's role in the narrative, as it became clear during the filming he was key to helping Mike's campaign. Ben is very articulate and fair minded man. His presence all through the film helped draw the audience into the story. The contribution of the post-production team at Molinare, was excellent. Their colour grading, sound design and mixing, and online editing all further polished Tim's great work.

Q: How did your vision for the film evolve over the course of the production process?

Our ambition and vision for the film never really changed, but our expectations for how the film would eventually turn out did and we think for the better. When we started the project the case was scheduled for March 2008, but only eventually got heard in July 2008, with the result still not announced until November. The case became caught up in the wider political situation in Zimbabwe, namely the two presidential elections. None of us could have foreseen that. It complicated the production, financing and delivery schedule but has resulted in a better film that enabled us all to embrace a wider vision of where the film might play in terms of distribution.

Q: Music plays a big role in the film. How did it come together?

Music can make or break a film, so a lot of time was spent trying to find the right composer to write the score. That person eventually turned out to be Jonny Pilcher. He liked the project and he seemed to immediately sense the mood that we were trying to capture. Initially he wrote generic music beds, which Tim could cut to and later as the structure of the film came together and the fine cutting process began, wrote specific pieces for specific sequences in the film.

Q: How long did it take to make Mugabe and the White African?

From concept to completion / delivery it will have been in excess of 16 months. The shooting itself took place over a 9 month period, the edit (there will be 2 distinct versions, one for theatrical release and a shorter TV version) spanned almost 4 months.

Q: Can films of this kind really make any 'difference'?

We hope, by making this film, to find out the answer to that. Certainly from our experience of making the Comic Relief appeal films over so many years, it seems that they can make a difference. Film and television can be very powerful tools. It is our responsibility as filmmakers to get the message out there, to give a voice to people who wouldn't otherwise be heard.

Q: Who will watch this film?

Anyone who likes an amazing story. The issues at stake in the Campbell case are far bigger than any individual, or indeed any single country. Human Rights, the rule of law, democracy - all these things are universal and touch all of our lives wherever we're from and whatever our background. It will have an obvious appeal to niche groups and people who already have an interest in Africa and Zimbabwe in particular, but we hope the film will capture the attention of an audience that extends well beyond that. Our film is hopefully made in a way that is conscious of this and is thus accessible and meaningful to everyone, everywhere. Our hope is that people will see it and be moved and outraged and compelled to engage in a dialogue about the issues raised.

Q: Should we concern ourselves with the internal troubles of another country?

Yes, people should care about what is going on inside Zimbabwe. The eradication of the white farming community is just one small part of the whole mess that Zimbabwe finds itself in - but it seems extraordinary in this day and age that as a global community we still have no means to stand up to a dictator who brutalizes and subjugates his people, both black and white. Concerning ourselves with such a situation, and informing ourselves about it, is the first crucial step towards ultimately seeing it addressed.