

Articles

Filmmaker shares some "wheeling & dealing" advice

Daniela Faris · Johannesburg (South Africa) · 26/7/2007 16:28 · 29 votes

The **Encounters film festival** took place in Johannesburg last week, hosting an array of international and South African documentary films, workshops with directors, and a mobile documentary project.

I attended a workshop run by **Jihan el-Tahri**, an Emmy-nominated documentary director, known for her film *The House of Saud* and her recently released *Cuba: An African Odyssey*.

In this workshop, el-Tahri discussed the challenges that filmmakers face when creating heritage films that are heavily dependant on archive material. I was shocked when el-Tahri quoted the price usually paid for archived material: average international rates bill around €3 000 per minute.

During her talk, el-Tahri emphatically stated that "there is a certain amount of greed" that has crept into the archive industry, where archived material is being seen as more of a commodity, than historically and culturally significant pieces of a puzzle telling the stories of our shared heritage. However, she stated that she is against people not paying archive institutions for their fair share of material, as these are in place to safeguard and maintain such footage.

According to the director, an average documentary film of 52 minutes will usually feature about 10 minutes of archived material; but el-Tahri's films include 30 to 35 minutes of very precious historical footage. Despite her 'fair and square' philosophy when it comes to paying for archived material, the only way to make ends meet, especially with such a high-demand for historical data in her films, is for el-Tahri to get creative with alternative means of accessing this information.

Based on el-Tahri's presentation, I drew up a list of five hints and tips for finding alternative sources of historical material, which may be of value to filmmakers or researchers who are obsessed with unraveling historical myths and tales, and bringing them to the public, without breaking the bank.

1. Common sense prevails

The key to this lesson is using your common sense by thinking of who would have been in the right place, at the right time. The next step calls for some detective work: follow the trail of people, and you'd be surprised how many witnesses documented their experiences, and are willing to share the footage.

El-Tahri tells the story of when she was looking for footage for her *House of Saud* film, which tells the story of the rise of the Saudi royal family, from the 1930's onwards. As she was undertaking her research for the film, she discovered that there was to be a party held on foreign soil, to celebrate the hundredth anniversary of the founding of the kingdom of Saudi Arabia. She hounded the organisers for the guest list, and then proceeded to contact the people who she knew would have been in the country at the time. The families started digging into their treasure chests of family photographs and heirlooms, to provide el-Tahri with some priceless gems of never-seen-before footage.

2. "It's about wheeling and dealing"

This is a phrase that el-Tahri repeated often. Having tracked down original footage that had kindly been given to her by the owner, she now had some bargaining power to enter into negotiations with archive institutes. For example, she promised to house unseen footage she had uncovered through her research, at an archive institute in Saudi Arabia, in exchange for some of their archival material to be used in her film, free of charge.

3. Do the legwork

Trying to access materials stored by government can be challenging. El-Tahri believes that unwillingness to be helpful on their part is often as a result of the fact that the footage has not been logged, and therefore cannot be found.

El-Tahri was faced with such a problem when looking for footage in the Congo, so she offered to do the logging herself, free of charge, for three weeks, in exchange for access to the data for her film. By offering some time, and some legwork, she avoided being turned away empty handed, or having to hand over the bucks.

4. Think out of the box

Don't be fixated on looking for one source of footage, from one place in time – if you dig deep enough you may come up

with other witnesses to, and records of the event.

For example, you may be looking for footage of a meeting between say, the president of Angola and Finland. While the event may have taken place in Angola, don't forget that the Finnish president would have brought along his own team of people to document the event – so if you can't find resources in Angola, looking across the seas may provide you with an alternative source that records the same event.

El-Tahri also explained that public rallies or concerts that display events from a stage onto screens, could also be an alternative source of footage. The event is filmed, streamed and then stored on the service provider's hard drive – entering into negotiations with them about accessing this content may provide you with an alternative source of archive.

5. Know what you can get for free

Consult public domain archives such as **Footage Farm**, or online commercial archives such as **Buyout Footage**, for free material, or reduced prices.

Footage documenting public officers or official government business may be a surprising source of free material. El-Tahri explained that anything filmed by, or about the US government goes into the public domain after thirty years. But if you'd like footage before the thirty-year mark, you may request the release of the footage under the U.S. Freedom of Information Act - but this does take some time and paperwork to process. Also, material from the libraries of all US presidents are free of charge, so you could possibly find footage of important presidential visits or events here. Every country differs, so snoop around in your part of the world to find out what you can access without having to reach into your pocket.

Are you a documentary filmmaker at ease with treading 'off the beaten track' to find historical content for your films? I'm sure this list can be lengthened beyond five points, so feel free to comment on this story to share how you undertake your footage treasure hunts.

The Encounters Film festival continues this week, until 5 August in Cape Town.

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