TAKING CHARGE OF CABRAMATTA

TV Documentary, Directed by Dai Le, produced by Dai Le and Markus Lambert; ABC TV, 19 January 2005.

The young director of this documentary created a film which works on a number of levels. Together with her husband Markus Lambert, it was made in order to show 'the brighter side of Cabramatta',[1] a face which in the mid-1990s had disappeared from view. What most Australians knew was only the other, dark side as the media, starting in the 1980s, went on a decade-long frenzy painting a picture of rampant Asian crime and drug gangs operating freely in the 'heroin capital of Australia'.[2] What makes the film especially interesting is the important role in it of Phuong Ngo. Only weeks after filming finished Ngo was arrested and charged for the murder of John Newman, state Member of Parliament for Cabramatta.

The documentary follows Lambert, an employee of Fairfield Council, as he tries to work with local communities, in particular the Vietnamese and the Chinese, in organising a Lunar New Year Flower Festival in Cabramatta's main square.

As Knight notes: 'The film was hampered by communications breakdowns, strains in cultural differences and political manoeuvering'.[3] However, the film deftly builds on these problems and is a more interesting film for it. Initially it unfolds slowly and somewhat uneventfully, showing the nitty gritty of the emergence of the Flower Festival through the bureaucratic processes of local government. But then suddenly it picks up tempo. We see director and film/festival organiser — wife and husband — not only failing to communicate but giving vent to their frustration with each other. This is great, and courageous, film-making. It is up there with the most excruciating reality TV. Ironically, here are two film-makers from migrant backgrounds —- one Vietnamese, the other German — unable to co-operate amicably when trying to show the spirit of multiculturalism in practice in their beloved Cabramatta. Thus they demonstrate the extreme difficulties involved not just in filming a community in action, but in working in and with the community, especially the multi-cultured community of Cabramatta where it is very difficult to know who is in charge. As the difficulties develop for the festival organiser, Lambert, we see his despair at trying to understand the meaning and effect of events and people in a community he has worked in for ten years.

The central drama in the film emerges when local retail flower sellers complain that they have not been given an opportunity to sell their flowers from stalls in the square while an outside (and, as it happens, a non-Asian) wholesaler has been given the 'franchise' for the square. The retailer/locals threaten to sue the Council for compensation for loss of sales and perhaps discrimination, saying they have taken legal advice. The threat causes tempers to flare between the Director and Lambert. Negotiations are attempted but the retailers remain adamant. Unable to effectively harness community support to sort out the impasse, Lambert decides to close down the Festival to avoid getting the Council into legal strife.

But closing down the festival after its initial positive impact was never going to be easy. With a number of days remaining, participants, and those who wanted to be part of it, simply showed up the next day to keep it going for the rest of the promised week. Matters were thus complicated for Lambert by the sudden presence of unlicensed stallholders exercising what they saw as their right to take part in a selling opportunity and also to take a stand against the apparently corrupt informal process whereby the flower franchise had been granted to a single, outside supplier.

The whole matter is ambiguous not only to the viewer but most importantly to Lambert. Having threatened the 'squatter' retailers with fines he now has to make his threat credible. Unfortunately for him he hasn't the power to fine them and worse, he cannot contact (by his ever-ready weapon, the mobile phone) a Council Inspector with the legal authority. As the situation gets out of hand, and the Director (wife) and others give advice and duck for cover, the film is reminiscent of a classic Monsieur Hulot French comedy. I particularly enjoyed the many changes and styles of 'costume' Lambert moved through, representing at one moment the officious public servant and later the perplexed and worn-down community organiser. At one point, unguardedly, he picks his arse. It is really quite funny.

Finally, in desperation, Lambert turns to the local police. However, members of the community, including the Director, are ultimately successful in persuading him to change tack and to ask the police not to pursue the matter. In this context it is interesting that otherwise the police appear only occasionally in the film and mainly while searching or chasing after young Asians in the street. Thus there is a sense that they are a marginal, even potentially disruptive, element in the life of the community. And in the interaction with Lambert there is a hint that the police recognise this.

During all of this, we are shown Phuong Ngo as a respected community leader who has a feel for the way the community operates. Having been consulted on the evening of the announcement that the festival would close, Ngo 'agrees' with the retailers and others that there would be justification for their showing up the following day to take advantage of the sales prospects which had clearly developed as a result of the people attracted to the Cabramatta square. When he explains to Lambert that he had been consulted and the reasons for the 'rebellion', there is a classic moment of 'colonial' befuddlement. Their positions are reversed and Lambert — the outsider in this, for him, unfathomable place — realises his essential lack of understanding and therefore control. Plaintively, he asks Ngo: 'couldn't you have told me?' Ngo's response is perfect: 'What would be the point, they would have come back anyway'. This is great spontaneous film-making.

The documentary was not shown in 1998 because of the impending trial of Ngo, and had to be delayed many years as his ordeal lasted through three trials before the Crown secured a controversial conviction. With the delay for sentencing and his

appeals not completed until 2004, the film had to be held back so as not to interfere with the process of 'criminal justice'.

Many people in Cabramatta, and beyond, do not believe Phuong was justly convicted. The film helps us to understand that belief. At the symbolic level, the film reminds us how little was understood about the dynamics of Cabramatta in the late 1980s and mid 1990s. The film raises questions, for example, if the police were in fact marginal, how much were they aware of the real life of the community at the time of Newman's death? One might also ask why the local commander, who expressed the view that Phuong was innocent, was kept out of the investigation. If Cabramatta was the 'heroin capital' of Australia, surely anti-drugs police surveillance, including wiretaps, would have been monitoring Phuong and others in and around the 'notorious' Mekong Club of which he was the guiding force. Under such circumstances, is it likely that Phuong and others conspired to kill Newman without the police being well aware of it beforehand? And why was the police theory that Phuong was the killer adopted so early? As in so many of our wrongful convictions, the police theory acts as a barrier to a search for the truth. Police try to prove their theory. And with the aid of the media, that theory is sold to the public who, having little understanding of the context in which the crime was committed, are happy to accept the police/media account.

Newman was widely disliked. His actions in the local community have given rise to ambiguous readings of who he was. It is now clear that many people had a reason to kill him. We know his office was shot at, that his car was paint-bombed and that he received death threats. We know that another anti-drugs campaigner, Donald Mackay, was murdered in mysterious circumstances. As with Phuong, in that case the convicted killer has always maintained he was framed.[4] The film throws a new and interesting light on the Newman killing. After the murder, Ngo was immediately nominated as the killer by one of Newman's colleagues on the Fairfield Council, Mr Chapman. In the film Chapman is seen vehemently attacking Ngo over a matter relating to Council policy re the 'Two China Policy'. He shouts out 'someone wants to be God'. Of course Local Council politics can be hyperbolic and dirty. However, Ngo comes across as the peacemaker, a calm and confident man, one who was not rattled by others' antagonism. He does not appear to be the kind of person who would feel it necessary to resort to violence, nor the organisation of a 'joint enterprise' to murder (which is what he was eventually convicted of, though all others were found 'not guilty').

While the film sets out to show the real, human face of Cabramatta, unsullied by media demonisation and racial marginalisation, it also reminds us of the difficulties facing outsiders, be they police or media, in attempting to understand highly encoded and community specific interactions. Something happened in September 1994 resulting in the death of a public figure. The police took four years to come up with a story. But so unconvincing was it that it had to be entirely re-constructed when subjected to the scrutiny of a public trial. And so it was re-constructed, with the aid of coercive powers and institutions such as the secretive NSW Crime Commission. Why should we believe it, especially when key witnesses against Phuong were demonstrably unreliable and nearly a dozen were given immunity from prosecution? And why should we believe it when local people in the community are reported to feel pressured by the state to keep quiet about the case?

Ultimately, understanding the investigation into the murder of John Newman and the resultant conviction of Phuong Ngo may tell us more about ourselves, including our attitude to communities such as Cabramatta, than we appear presently ready to hear.

GILL BOEHRINGER teaches in Public Law/Humanities at Macquarie University.

REFERENCES

1. A Knight, 'Trials and Tribulations' *Sydney Morning Herald*, The Guide, 17 January 2005, 3.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. B Bottom, *Shadow of Shame: How the Mafia Got Away with the Murder of Donald Mackay* (1988).

'Sit Down Girlie' continued from page 41

A can of sex please

As if life isn't busy enough for women an enterprising clinical trial has been conducted at Melbourne University of a spray-on testosterone spray to make women enjoy sex more. Professor Susan Davies says the spray isn't intended to increase episodes of sex but to make them better and the participants in the trial agreed. *Girlie*, being something of an inventor herself, suggests we include spray on energy, so women will have time to look good, enjoy sex, manage their husbands, kids, families and grandparents all at the same time. We could also stick a broom up their bums so they can sweep the floor while they apply the spray.

My cute little Kleenex

So if a woman does overcome all these corporate honchos and troglodytes and manages to breed, what should she name her offspring so they will blend in with their peers? Bridie Smith, *The Age's* Consumer Affairs Reporter, covers as a front-page story (*The Age*, 12 February 2005) a Melbourne University study of the names modern parents are giving to their kids. Very scary reading. Popular names include Lexus, Pepsi, Nike, Armani, Diesel, Versace and Chanel. The researcher, Dr Jui Shan Chang concludes that today people's self-worth is so tied up with consumerism that self-identity is constructed from it.

The times they are a changing

Singer Tom Jones sometimes referred to as the 'knicker magnet' has appealed to women to stop chucking their undies at him on stage. It used to be original, sexy and fun, he says, but it has now lost its meaning and detracts from his ballads.

VAL EWES is a feminist lawyer.