

REALISING IN THOSE FAVOURITE OLD TOYS OF THE PAST

TOY STORIES

Film student MAYA NEWELL has captured the tragicomic last days of Sydney icon Richard Blackie in her debut documentary *RICHARD*, and as the young director explains, the story has had more twists beyond the final cut. BY JULIAN SHAW



Overflowing with decades of pop cultural paraphernalia, the iconic old toy shop in Petersham was a treasured haunt for locals. Most notorious was its odd yet strangely charismatic owner – a man named Richard Blackie, who was of self-proclaimed American-Indian descent, and once plied his trade as a Michael Jackson impersonator, only to watch in despair as his hero's features morphed almost beyond recognition. Fiery, articulate and obsessed with "collecting the toys of the world", Richard would enthral visitors with stories both imagined and real. But beneath this gregarious persona was a man emotionally crippled by his inner demons – which are deftly explored in a probing documentary from 21-year-old Maya Newell, which carries the subtitle *The Most Interesting Person I've Ever Met*.

Newell (now studying Media, Arts and Production) was admitted into Sydney Film School on a scholarship after completing her higher education. The project that would become *Richard* began to emerge within her first few weeks at the institution. "I pitched a five-minute documentary film idea, and gradually that story got bigger and bigger until I ended up working on it for the whole year," Maya explains over coffee in a packed-to-the-rafters Newtown cafe. So why didn't she originally see the work as the hour-long doco that it would eventually become? "I suppose I was pretty naïve," Newell replies. "I was just out of high school, and it came about because Richard's shop has always been there around the corner from my house since I was ten. I would always walk past and see these kewpie

dolls and Marilyn Monroe figures and Elvis faces staring at me. It wasn't until I was a teenager that I actually went inside and started talking to Richard. We just talked, and three hours later I knew a lot of his life story. I did that four or five times before I even filmed anything. That was all about building the trust that is so central to documentaries."

The first time that Maya brought a camera into the shop, the lens was promptly spun around in her face by the manic shop owner. "Richard turned the

project became a mourning process," Maya explains. "After he died, I was in my own world looking at the footage. It's so strange. Maybe I would edit it in a different way now...but maybe not. It was all quite emotive, and I could put on screen what I loved about him."

Charged comments like this have led to inevitable accusations of exploitation being levelled at Newell. "This film is totally about my relationship with Richard," she replies. "And people of course accused me of being exploitive.

Having finished her production entirely as a student, Maya is well placed to comment on Sydney Film School as a breeding ground for future auteurs. "Pretty simply, the staff just work their arses off," she says. "Often they're leaving around midnight because they're helping students with their work. When project deadlines are coming up, they are there in the editing room until 3:00am. The staff are just so passionate about film."

Since the film's emergence (it nabbed a spot at Cannes last year), friends and ex-lovers of Richard have contacted Maya. "On any other documentary, you'd continue the relationship with your subject, but Richard's suicide has made that impossible. But it has brought new people into my life and revealed new dimensions to Richard. There's much more to be told." Indeed, the greatest twist in the story has only just emerged. "A couple of months after Richard died, I was contacted by a young woman who hadn't seen her mum since she was eleven or twelve-years-old. She sent me pics of Richard and her at the zoo. This was a daughter who he hadn't seen in ten or fifteen years. This girl, who I believe had a Filipino mother, looked very similar to me. So I think that speaks very highly of the nature of my relationship with Richard. He had that knowledge for three months and I didn't. I talked to his daughter for a long time, and there is more to say, but I don't think I'm ready to go back for *Richard 2* just yet..."



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camera on me and said, 'How do you like it?' That is literally the beginning of the film."

Maya accumulated around five hours of footage under a skin-tight shooting ratio, buttoning on and off only for dramatic moments. As a personality profile, she was fashioning a curious piece, but after the deeply troubled Richard committed suicide, the nature of her footage took on a shocking new resonance. "The

But that's kind of what a documentary is. It's really strange because the subject wants you to do that. You are giving up their life because they want that. As documentary filmmakers, we are peeking into people's lives and taking things from them in a way. When we're accused of being exploitive, people forget that at that time the subject *wants* to give that of themselves."

Richard is available now on DVD.
For more information on
The Sydney Film School, head to
www.sydneyfilmschool.com.au. ■