

Tragic tale's screen debut

Drew Sheldrick

HE was the little-known local identity made famous by his tragic end: Richard Blackie was the peculiar proprietor of a Petersham toy store and a former Michael Jackson impersonator who committed suicide in 2006.

Found in the back of his toy store (and home), the ward of the state was thought to have no known family when his body was left unclaimed in the morgue, though relatives were eventually identified. Believed to have suffered from depression, Blackie's life and death, his plastic surgery to mimic Michael Jackson, and the millions of toys he had collected, have become the stuff of legend.

Among the lesser known parts of Blackie's life (of which there were many), few knew that a 17-year-old budding film-maker was making a documentary about him three months before his death. Maya Newell made the film as part of her studies at the Sydney Film School. Called *Richard*, the DVD of her debut work will be released this week. Newell's portrait of Blackie showcases intimate conversations about the eccentric's public obsessions and private torments. Through her curious friendship, she was able to gain access to the notoriously private man and his bizarre toy shop.

"I used to drive past his shop with my mum from the age of 10 and was always intrigued by the life-sized effigies of Marilyn Monroe and Elvis in the window," Newell, now 20, said.

"One day I got up the courage to go in there and ended up hearing Richard's life story like so many others who visited his store."

When Newell was presented with the task of pitching a documentary as part of the curriculum at Sydney Film School in 2006, she asked Blackie if he would take part. He was initially apprehensive, but Newell said she believed her long-standing friendship with the 41-year-old swayed him, despite Blackie's experiences with people trying to exploit his story. His trust in Newell was evident in his intense, open discussions, including those about taking his own life.

"I think I was aware of the spiralling sequence of events leading up to his death, but discussing suicide and actually doing so is obviously quite different," Newell said.

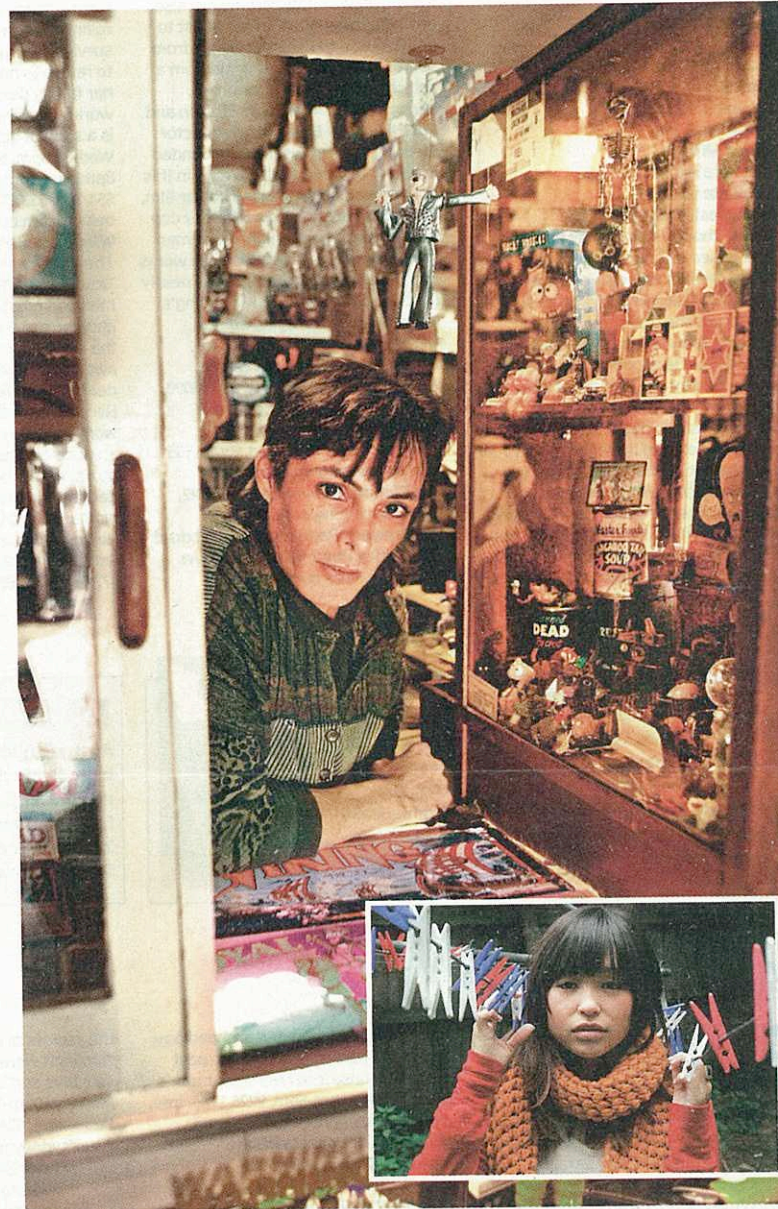
After initially considering to dump the film after his suicide, Newell reasoned that it was a great opportunity to celebrate his life.

"It was a chance to tell the story of one of these people on the edge of society, and the places that are important to them. It was a difficult process that taught me the delicate position and incredible responsibility a documentary film-maker has in telling someone's story," she said.

As if more proof was needed of the mysterious life of her subject, long after his death Newell was contacted by Blackie's daughter. Her existence was one he had disclosed to few, if any, others.

"It was a very strange experience. She was my age and also part-Asian, which just highlighted to me the unusual connection I had to Richard and his story," she said.

Siren Visual will release the DVD of *Richard* nationally on September 18.



Richard Blackie photographed in 2004 at his store in Petersham; and (inset) Maya Newell. Photos: STEPHEN BACCON (MAIN) AND PHIL ROGER