

# Fighting the Fear: Julian Shaw on DARLING!

## The Pieter-Dirk Uys Story

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**F**OR most fifteen year olds, the idea of spending a night with their parents watching a South African performer speak about the HIV/AIDS epidemic sweeping his homeland is about as thrilling as spending a weekend at school. However, in the case of Sydney's Julian Shaw, political satirist Pieter-Dirk Uys' show *Foreign Aids* would change his life. Instantly engaged and committed to the idea of making a documentary about Uys, Shaw set off to South Africa armed with a camera and pure motivation.

The result of his journey is *Darling! The Pieter-Dirk Uys Story* (2007), an award-winning documentary capturing a remarkable life. Uys used humour to challenge the apartheid regime in South Africa, and he is well known for his satirical alter ego Evita Bezuidenhout, 'the most famous white woman in South Africa'. Uys' life-long quest has been to bring not only entertainment but also education and information to the young people of South Africa.

*Darling!* chronicles Uys' campaign to educate South African schoolchildren about the threat of HIV/AIDS. The film has screened at a number of national and international festivals, including the 2008 Berlin International Film Festival.

Shaw, now twenty-two, reflects on his inspiration for the project and the challenges he faced as a rookie filmmaker.

### Let's start at the beginning ...

I had never aspired to be a documentary filmmaker. From the age of eight I really

wanted to be a writer. Fiction was really my passion and fictional filmmaking was what I aspired to. I saw Pieter-Dirk Uys' show and – it's such a cliché, but it completely stopped my life for a moment. I remember thinking, 'This story is so much richer and more interesting than anything fictional.' I had to make the film. It wasn't a choice; it became an obsession.

**You were only fifteen. Were your parents, teachers and friends just nodding and thinking, 'Well, we'll just see how he does'?**

I think so, which actually motivated me. I had to negotiate an independent learning contract with my school to go two days a week in my final HSC year. I think a lot of people thought it wouldn't come to anything, but I always knew in my heart if I stuck with it, if I had integrity and if I worked incredibly hard then I'd get there.

**How did you raise enough money to start the film?**

When I was sixteen I called everyone I knew and went after some organizations. I also received money from my school to go over to South Africa. It's not something I'm proud of, but I used all of that money on the first day. I thought a documentary had to be shot on 35mm film otherwise it wasn't a *real* movie. I didn't consider that it might be in the interests of the storytelling to shoot a bit more coverage and use digital cameras. Once I figured that out the overheads came down a bit! I met an Australian producer in 2004 called Jonathon Green, and we worked together to raise the money, with help towards the end from the AIDS Trust of Australia.

**Did you have much knowledge about South Africa before you arrived there?**

I knew who Nelson Mandela was and that was about it. I just had to do a complete crash course. I read everything I could – books, studies and the South African newspapers – until my eyes popped out. I let Pieter guide me as well, as he was able to take me right into the heart of the country to people like Desmond Tutu – the most extraordinary opportunity. Through Pieter I was able to get right into the core of all of these issues.

**What were your biggest concerns about going into South Africa and filming?**

I should have been more concerned. The first day there I just jumped into this township called Atlantis and started filming people in their houses. I got away with everything after that because I was so careful and paranoid. You have to remember, I was just this kid alone, carrying thousands of dollars of film equipment. I was always looking over my shoulder and somehow made it through.

**So, your parents didn't go with you to South Africa?**

No, I did it solo. It was the biggest learning curve I've ever had. I see life as a series of adventures and, to date, that's probably the biggest and scariest one I've ever taken.

**Was it difficult setting up interviews given your age and inexperience?**

I found the opposite, in a funny sort of way. People had such low expectations that they went along with it and I used that to my advantage. The first person I needed to get to sign the release form was Pieter-Dirk Uys. I had to write to him from Australia and say, 'Hi Pieter, I'm fifteen. I saw your show. I'm hoping I can start making my first film about you.' And, of course, the response was like, 'Hey, that sounds great. Come and do it.' I don't think he ever thought it would happen. He got the shock of his life when I turned up in South Africa with a camera. I just think people didn't really think it would work out, so they were accommodating. There's nothing wrong with people having low expectations of you – it can be a blessing.

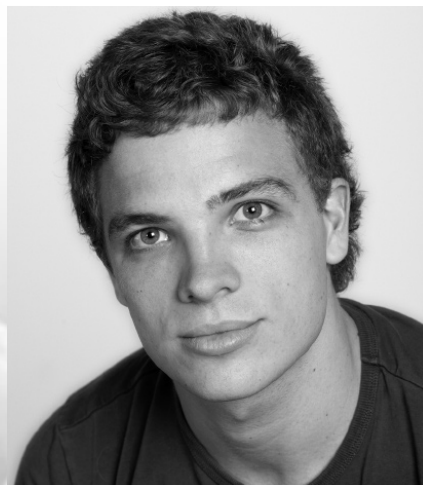
**It must have been a complete culture shock, shooting in a country with huge poverty, mammoth unemployment and high infant mortality rates. Was it hard to return and witness friends annoyed with their iPod or discussing designer jeans?**

We are in such a luxurious situation in Australia because recharging your iPod is sometimes the most pressing concern. I think that apathy, politically, comes about because we don't have the life and death concerns they do in Africa. I was quite emotionally shattered the first time that I went there – I don't think you can escape that. As inspiring as the optimism is in Africa, there are these unbelievably complex problems to do with HIV and AIDS, education – all issues young people are facing.

Initially I couldn't get my head around it, until I realized – through talking to and spending time with Pieter – that there was one common denominator to everything, and that was fear. It was fear during apartheid that led to people accepting this completely inhumane system, and it's fear that's stopping information about HIV and AIDS flowing freely through the continent. I knew from a storytelling perspective that fear is completely universal. We may not face the same social problems as the people in *Darling!*, but that fear of asking questions is present everywhere in the world. I knew that if I really delved into that I'd be telling a universal story. I've been so gratified that the film has been able to play all around the world. I was humbled by the response at the Berlin Film Festival. People just threw their arms around me and around the film and it was just wonderful. It may seem like a South African story but really it's a universal one.

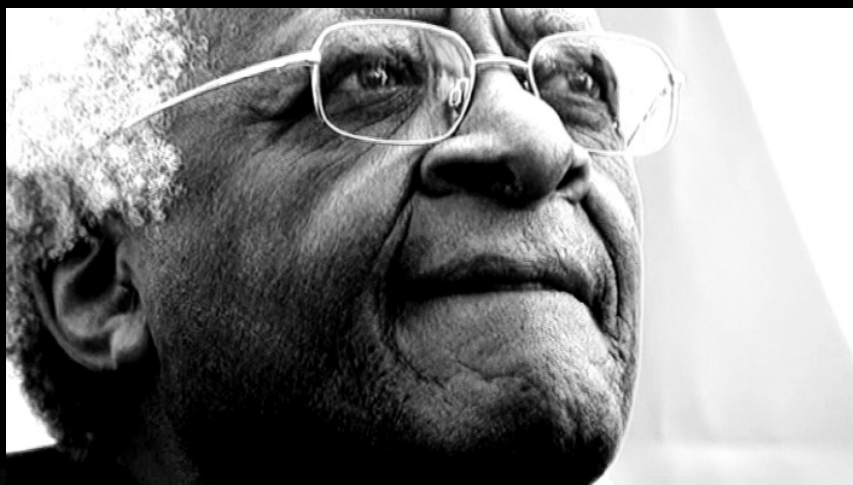
**There are high-profile people, like Desmond Tutu, in the film. Were you under pressure to make something really good?**

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ABOVE: FILMMAKER JULIAN SHAW  
BELOW: PIETER-DIRK UYS GETS READY TO PERFORM

Definitely. Pieter has done such extraordinary and inspiring work and I knew I had to make a great film. I've seen hundreds of movies and hundreds of documentaries and the one thing I really know is a great subject doesn't [always] mean a great film. I knew my work was cut out for me. When you have people like Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu, you do have to deliver. For me, it was about getting under the layers of all of these issues, and, at the same time, always keeping the humour. That's the thing about Pieter that is magic – he always insists on a fifty-one per cent comedy, forty-nine per cent anger equation. I knew the film had to do that as well. You can get so overwhelmed and upset about the issues in Africa that you're paralysed with fear. But if you can make a film that's going to make people laugh, it's going to leave



sediment in their mind [about] all of those deeper issues. Maybe they won't think about it at the time, but later on they'll think about it and that's when people reflect and decide they really want to do something about those issues.

**Due to the complexity of the issues facing South Africa, were there moments during filming when it all became too much?**

Definitely! Initially it was 'My goodness, what have I got myself into? How am I going to sift through all of this?' When you're discovering the country and its politics, it's so complex, but I was able to pinch myself and think: 'I'm telling the story of one man, the story of now. I'm not going to tell Pieter's whole past, people can look that up. I'm going to make a film about what he's doing now with the young people in South Africa. And if I can really just focus on that and really get under his skin then all of those other, bigger political and social issues will take care of themselves, in a way.' I knew if I could just take care of the really personal stuff I'd be able to tell a bigger story at the same time.

**How did the teenagers you met differ from yourself and other Australian teens?**

They just have this knowledge and passion about politics that you don't see in Australia. For a country that has had so much darkness in its past – and its present – the optimism is just contagious. Talking to young people who were my age at the time was definitely the



most inspiring part of the whole process and it was the absolute beating heart of this story.

**Did you think that you guided *Darling!* or, due to your inexperience, that Pieter did?**

A combination. I'm incredibly grateful that Pieter opened up his life to me, but I don't want to paint myself as this naive kid either. I knew what I wanted, I knew the story and I pushed him to open up all of those places to me. The other thing is it's many, many hours of conversation that leads to the kind of rapport and intimacy that you get (hopefully) in *Darling!* In a documentary you get a thirty-second sound bite but there might have been three hours of conversation that led to that. The only thing that matters is trust with your subject, and the reality is that takes time to build, and you simply don't get it if you don't do a good job.

**Are you surprised by the reaction *Darling!* has received?**

I finished this film over a year ago and it's still finding its way out there. As a first-time filmmaker you have to be very, very patient. It's wonderful though. I've been lucky enough to win some awards. [Winning] the Independent Spirit Inside Film Award [in 2007] was an incredible honour, and I was so happy to receive acknowledgement from Australia because this film may have a South African subject but it's 100 per cent an Australian voice and filmmaker behind

the camera. I also heard from Desmond Tutu recently; he said he was really inspired by the film. You just think, 'If ever I felt like it wasn't worth it, that just made it completely worthwhile!'

**You have since made another documentary ...**

I've been working on various projects. I was shooting a film in New Zealand last year, with the All Blacks. I've got a film I'm developing now all about the obsession in New Zealand with the All Blacks and what's really at the core of the psychology of that. I also have some other fictional films I'm developing at the moment. I can only follow things that make me think, 'I don't have a choice ... I have to make this.'

I've also been working on another project with the Australian actor Colin Friels, a photo-novel called *Modern Odysseus* <<http://www.modernodysseus.com.au>>. It's a movie in book form; something a bit different and new. There's always something creative going on.

*Julian Shaw is available to speak at schools about Darling! For more information, click on the Public Speaking link at <<http://www.darlingmovie.com.au>>.*

*Fiona Killackey is a full-time freelance writer whose work regularly appears in magazine, online and newspaper publications throughout Australia, New Zealand, the United States and the United Kingdom.* •

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ABOVE: PIETER-DIRK UYS EDUCATES SOUTH AFRICAN SCHOOLCHILDREN ABOUT THE THREAT OF HIV/AIDS  
UPPER LEFT: DESMOND TUTU APPEARS IN *DARLING!*